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## Career Progression and the Imposter Phenomenon: Experiences of Female Student Affairs Leaders

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CAREER PROGRESSION AND THE IMPOSTER PHENOMENON: EXPERIENCES  
OF FEMALE STUDENT AFFAIRS LEADERS

by

Molly M. Belieu

A DISSERTATION

Presented to Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Educational Studies  
(Educational Leadership and Higher Education)

Under the Supervision of Professor Marilyn Grady

Lincoln, Nebraska

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# CAREER PROGRESSION AND THE IMPOSTER PHENOMENON: EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE STUDENT AFFAIRS LEADERS

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University of Nebraska, 2021

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This study explored the experiences of women leaders who graduated from a student affairs master's degree program, and advanced to positions of vertical movement to roles of increasing responsibility, wider influence, and greater accountability. Specifically, exploration of this progression, and the influences on their experience of lateral movement, including the impostor's syndrome. Three themes emerged from this study: (a) the influence of relationships on career progression, (b) navigating the structures of higher education, and (c) experiences of the Imposter Phenomenon. The results of this study can support student affairs preparation programs as they determine the competencies necessary to prepare professionals for navigating a career of progressive leadership and influence in higher education. Additionally, the results of this study can help university administration as they support student affairs professionals. Finally, the results of this study provide considerations for women as they consider careers in higher education. Considerations for organizational structures, succession planning, peer support channels and how to best support that important population on college campuses. Future research opportunities are also discussed as they relate to understanding progression experiences of student affairs professionals.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Women who work in higher education administrative (student affairs) roles have unique experiences in traversing the career ladder and progressing through advancement opportunities (Biddix, 2011). The pathway to a mid- to senior-level administrative or leadership role is not necessarily consistent; no one path exists to achieving progression through these ranks, as many factors influence women's ability to do so (Miller, 2007; Ralston, 2019); additionally, individuals' experiences as they traverse that progression shape the ways in which they lead. Women's perceptions of their lived experiences are fruitful in discovering factors that both support and potentially hinder success as these individuals grow and move forward as leaders in their careers. Some factors to consider include organizational structures within various institutions of higher education; women's personal experiences within career progression related to supervisory support, professional development, mentorship, peer networks and engagement on campus.

Among these factors are women's experiences with a phenomenon known as the impostor syndrome. Seventy percent (70%) of people who hold leadership or high-level roles experience this phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978). Despite high qualifications and clear demonstrated ability to hold such roles, individuals' confidence are affected by a constant fear that they will be "found out" as incompetent or unworthy of their roles. Student affairs leaders within higher education have many factors that influence their experiences throughout their career advancement (Marshall et al., 2016); this phenomenon perhaps is one of them. While Clance and Imes originally studied the Imposter Syndrome in 1979 among high achieving women, researchers have applied the

phenomenon to men and women alike, as well as to individuals in different disciplines. Previous research includes studies focused on higher education including imposter syndrome among students (Villwock et al., 2018), faculty (McDevitt, 2006), and professionals such as librarians (Clark et al., 2014); however, a gap exists related to women leaders who hold non-faculty administrative roles in higher education. Further inquiry is necessary to understand the experiences of these women. By understanding the experiences of women who have traversed that career path, I will learn of the factors that helped their success, created barriers to that success, and ways in which future professionals can be supported by educational programs and supervisors to successfully navigate their own paths.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of the study is to examine the lived experiences of women who graduated from a student affairs cohort program, and have traversed the career ladder to mid to high-level student affairs leadership and administrative roles within higher education. This study seeks understanding of women's career experiences, including their vertical movement to roles of increasing responsibility, wider influence, and greater accountability. Exploration of this progression, and the influences on their experience of lateral movement, including the impostor's syndrome are reflected in the study.

### **Target Population**

Women who graduated from a student affairs cohort program at a Midwestern Research University and work or have worked in a higher education administrative role, at a mid- to senior-level position were the target population. These leaders have taken on vertical roles with increasing responsibility, more accountability, and expanded influence.

I sought participation from this group by posting on their alumni Facebook group, which individuals self-select as members.

### **Research Questions**

Three main research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How do women describe their career progression experiences through the ranks of the student affairs profession to mid-level, senior, and executive levels of leadership?

RQ2: How does the experience of mentorship impact women as they progress through the ranks of the student affairs profession to senior and executive levels of leadership?

RQ3: How does the imposter phenomenon impact women as they progress through the ranks of the student affairs profession to senior and executive levels of leadership?

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

Creswell and Poth (2018) described the importance of researcher reflexivity as “qualitative research is a dialectical process that affects and changes both the participants and the researcher, at least to some extent” and it is “incumbent upon the researcher to be reflexive: to consider issues such as positionality and insider/outsider stances in research to try to own their effects in the process in so far as this is possible” (p. 64). As the researcher, I brought my professional and personal lenses to the study. I am student affairs professional who is traversing the career ladder in higher education administrative roles. Additionally, I am an adjunct instructor in a student affairs program where I interact with and educate current and future leaders in higher education. My background

and experience lead me to this research area, as I have the desire to influence those who seek leadership in this profession. Because I am aware of my own perspectives on these phenomena, I will aside my own experiences in this work as I conducted the interviews with participants, allowing their stories to shape the research.

**Delimitations**

The scope of the research is to use qualitative case study as the research method and by interviewing ten individual participants as the data source.

**Limitations**

Researcher bias in and of itself is a limitation to the study. As the researcher, I was aware of my position in the study, and did everything I could to be intentional with the analyses and aware of my bias.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of the Literature**

This literature review is an examination of the (a) career advancement and progression paths in student affairs/higher education; (b) career development factors, including mentorship as career support, formal vs informal training, job satisfaction, professional development, career experiences as learning; (c) the impostor phenomenon/syndrome; and (d) female student affairs leaders and their career experiences.

#### **Career Advancement in the Student Affairs Profession**

What does the career advancement of professionals into mid-level student affairs roles look like? What does the success of individuals in those roles depend upon? What does the career advancement of professionals into senior student affairs officer roles look like? What does the success of individuals in those roles depend upon? How do professionals attain the competencies necessary to be successful in student affairs careers at any level? What factors influence individuals' success even once they have obtained those competencies identified for success?

The career paths of individuals who seek professional advancement in student affairs vary greatly. Of note, individuals have no specific blueprint that maps career trajectory from entry-level to mid-level to senior student affairs officer (Marshall et al., 2016; Muller et al., 2018). Furthermore, while the exact pathway through advancement and progression through a career in student services is not explicitly defined, neither are the ways in which one is to obtain the competencies necessary to be successful in the field (Biddix, 2011; Cooper et al., 2016; Muller et al., 2018). These concepts align with

the work of Eagly and Carli (2007) in their book *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders*. Eagly and Carli seek understanding of the glass ceiling concept, acknowledging that women are increasingly shattering that ceiling; however, the paths by which they must traverse to get to leadership pinnacles is long and arduous. They describe the experience of women advancing in their careers to positions of leadership as anything but a straight line of progression, but rather, a “labyrinth” (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The authors utilize the labyrinth metaphor to symbolize the situations that women face as leaders and potential leaders:

As a contemporary symbol, the labyrinth conveys the idea of a complex journey that entails challenges and offers a goal worth striving for. Passage through a labyrinth is not simple or direct, but requires persistence, awareness of one’s progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead. For women who aspire to attain leadership, routes to this goal exist but can present both unexpected and expected twists and turns. Because all labyrinths have a viable route to their center, it is understood that goals are attainable. But passing through a labyrinth is more demanding than traveling a straight path. Thus, the labyrinth provides an encouraging metaphor for aspiring women and recognition of the challenges that these women face. (p. 73)

The labyrinth concept adequately reflects the pathways of women as they navigate their career progression; literature related to the experiences of progression among professionals in higher education as they navigate their careers to mid-level and to the senior-level positions that align with Eagly and Carli’s (2007) metaphor.

While Biddix (2013) noted that career paths in student affairs follow a course that is generally conventional, including a graduate degree to entry-level position, progressive responsibility until middle management, and then a decision to remain, work to advance, or change fields, he also notes that the exact blueprint does not exist for progression to and through a student affairs career (Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Biddix (2011) noted that while literature addresses the career experiences of student affairs professionals,

influences on success in their careers to flourish in middle-management roles as well as advancement into those roles and beyond, further research is needed to understand the factors that influence that success. To continue understanding these experiences of career navigation, we must discover the factors within individuals' career "labyrinths" that create challenges along the way. How individuals cope with and handle those challenges, as well as the factors that can support them are necessary understandings. Of note, too, is the role of professional development, including the methods of professional development that support professionals' movement into and beyond middle management (Miller, 2007). What is the importance of mentorship in supporting individuals to advance in their student affairs careers? How does the imposter syndrome apply to potential barriers to success through the advancement experience?

While studies of the functional job areas within student services are a good foundation for understanding the career experiences of individuals in the field, Biddix (2011) noted that before his study three decades of research were yet to outline a defined pathway to the senior student affairs role. Rather, the focus on functional areas has provided an incomplete picture of a blueprint for successful navigation to and through mid-level and senior student affairs roles. Furthermore, because success at the mid-level student affairs role is seemingly influential on a professional's progression to a senior role, an understanding of the factors that influence success at the mid-level is crucial to understanding the career advancement to senior level roles.

According to Ford (2014), as women progress through their careers in student affairs, they can expect to encounter both positive and negative experiences that will influence that progression. Some of those experiences include building a strong

professional network of colleagues, embracing and leading change, and continuing education and professional development (Miller, 2007). Additionally, Ford (2014) noted the importance of women playing an intentional role in developing themselves and their path through progression into next levels of the profession. Factors to consider in advancement among women in student affairs include, job satisfaction, work-life balance, and clarity of career paths in student affairs (Ford, 2014).

A gap that remains in the literature is the experiences of women who have made it to the senior level of the student affairs profession and their stories of how they reached that point. Because the midlevel experiences have influence on the success of progression to the senior level (Biddix, 2011), further research on those experiences and the factors that allow professionals to achieve success at that level is needed (Muller et al., 2018). The road for high achieving women in higher education is long and thankless, often including little encouragement about the rewards of the work. Fochtman (2011) interviewed ten women in senior student affairs roles, deeming them as high-achieving women. She sought to understand how these individuals got to where they were in their careers, and why they stayed. The expectation was that they would heavily discuss their current leadership roles; however, her findings included much conversation related to their initial leadership experiences in higher education at the midlevel, and the influences those roles had upon their subsequent roles and ability to advance (Fochtman, 2011).

### ***Midlevel Student Affairs Roles***

The middle management level is a noted step in the progression of a student affairs career, but also can serve as a bottleneck to advancement, particularly for women (Biddix, 2013). The ways in which individuals learn and navigate through that middle

management experience influences their overall career progression in student services.

Following an entry-level position or comparable experience, many student affairs

professionals seek a directorship of a functional area or a dean position (Biddix, 2013).

An understanding of the competencies needed for success in middle management roles is

demonstrated in the literature through assessment of individuals who hold mid-level and

senior student affairs roles (Biddix, 2011, 2013; Rosser, 2004). *Does the imposter*

*syndrome have an influence on success at this level?*

The middle-level student affairs professional is the unsung professional of the higher education academy (Biddix, 2011; Rosser, 2004). Contributions of professionals at this level of student affairs work are significant (Rosser, 2004); furthermore, the mid-level work is a significant time in the career of student affairs professionals (Wilson et al., 2016). These professionals represent a large portion of administrative professionals across the academy, and yet are somewhat underrepresented in the literature (Biddix, 2013). In a study of midlevel professionals, Wilson et al. (2016) explored factors related to career commitment, career entrenchment, and demographic characteristics. They identified that the midlevel professional is simultaneously crucial to accomplishing the mission of higher education, and at the same time, a population understudied in literature (Wilson, et al., 2016).

Describing the definition and experiences of midlevel professionals in student affairs; generally, midlevel professionals are the middle-line managers on the organizational hierarchy between those who perform basic services and those who provide vision and direction for the organization (Biddix, 2011; Wilson et al., 2016). Specifically in student affairs, Carpenter and Stimpson (2007) defined midlevel as

reporting directly to the senior student affairs officer or being one level removed from the senior officer and overseeing at least one student affairs function or supervising at least one professional staff member. Additionally, Rosser (2004) described the midlevel of the academy and the role professionals play in that capacity. She noted that the “middleness” of their role in and of itself describes the nuances that affect individuals’ experiences at that level. That “middleness” includes achieving balance between serving as a leader to those who execute functions that support students directly and indirectly, and serving the leaders above them to reinforce their directives (Rosser, 2004).

The professional identity of individuals at the midlevel in student affairs is crucial and yet often undefined. Wilson et al. (2016) noted that “a strong professional identity is helpful in navigating the rocky terrain of a student affairs career” (p. 568). According to Biddix (2013), while the exact role of midlevel professionals is dependent upon the functional area for which they are responsible, they are generally accountable for functions such as staff supervision, performance appraisal, planning, staff development, and oversight of credibility and ethical decision making among their teams. These individuals simultaneously manage down and up; down to the daily support and guidance of staff members and up to facilitating interpretations of policy and guidance to the senior leadership to whom they report. While providing support to other individuals and their professional development, midlevel professionals must also ensure they are fostering their own professional identity within the team and organization to ensure they are setting a foundation for themselves as they navigate the needs of those around them, as well as the institution (Wilson et al., 2016).

### ***Senior Level Student Affairs Roles (SSAO)***

In a quantitative study of 250 senior student affairs officers (SSAO) across the United States, Biddix (2011) examined the career paths of those individuals as they advanced to the senior role at 4-year institutions. Biddix discussed the midcareer student affairs role as a notable milestone experience among those who reached the senior student affairs level. Even with this consistent, formative milestone, Biddix (2011) also noted “career paths in student affairs administration include a broad range of choices for advancement. Ill-defined pathways, vague entry points, and inexplicit criteria for determining mobility have added confusion over routes to senior leadership as well as contributed to attrition” (p. 443).

### ***Job Satisfaction***

Individuals’ job satisfaction has an influence on not only their success within the role, but also their intentions to remain in their jobs. This factor is especially true with individuals in midlevel student affairs roles, which ultimately influences their progression into senior level positions (Wilson et al., 2016). Factors that influence job satisfaction include mentorship, work-life balance, professional development, supervision and leadership support (Rosser, 2004).

**Professional Development and Mentorship.** Winston and Creamer (1998) discuss the need for coaching of individuals in student affairs, and the impact of intentional professional development on skill building noting that they are “critical to accomplishing the institutional goals understudied in higher education” (p. 557). Additionally, the presence or lack of presence of mentors and role models has an important influence on individuals’ professional development experience in higher

education leadership (Miller, 2007). While both formal and informal mentorship relationships are possible to serve this purpose, professionals often have no formal relationship. Instead, they learn organically from other professionals how to best navigate their career experiences (McNair, et al., 2013). Blackhurst (2000) studied the career experiences of women in student affairs, and the effects of mentor relationships on certain career variables including, “role conflict and role ambiguity, organizational commitment, career satisfaction, and perceived sex discrimination” (p. 575). The study determined a significant connection between individuals’ satisfaction with their role and likelihood of persisting and committing to the institution as being related to their experience with a mentor relationship. Implications for professionals’ satisfaction based upon these factors were noted (Blackhurst, 2000)

### **The Imposter Syndrome/Phenomenon**

In 1978, Drs. Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes’ original research came forth, describing individuals’ experience with having difficulty accepting that they are credible and, despite outward appearances, internally feel as though they are frauds to be “found out.” Their research discovered “a pervasive pattern of dismissing accomplishments and believing that their success would disappear once others discovered the awful secret that they were, in fact, impostors” (Young, 2011, p. 2). While this concept has now been described as being experienced by both men and women, the original study focused on women’s feelings of inadequacy, regardless of their expertise and tangible factors of credibility within their disciplines. As Eagly and Carli (2007) describe women’s experiences throughout their careers to and through leadership roles, they note that the pathway for women in leadership has evolved over time. Historically, a



concrete wall barrier that was nearly impenetrable existed for women who sought leadership roles. That barrier evolved to a glass ceiling that demonstrated the ability for women to attempt leadership attainment with an invisible barrier that even the most accomplished of women encountered on their path to the top. The evolution to present day now includes a world in which women do hold positions of leadership, but must navigate a labyrinth to reach those positions. This labyrinth includes pathways to leadership roles that inevitably are comprised of twists and turns along the way (Eagly & Carli, 2007). What are those twists and turns for individuals who traverse the pathways toward leadership in student affairs? Furthermore, Pedler (2011) discusses the imposter syndrome among individuals who seek leadership roles. Does this dynamic exist among student affairs professionals, affecting their career experiences, and ultimately their success in mid-level and eventually senior-level positions?

Dr. Valerie Young (2011) notes in her book, *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer from the Imposter Syndrome and How to Thrive in Spite of It*, that even if women are able to encounter and surpass the myriad of occupational barriers that face them, their inner barriers related to the imposter syndrome prevent them from taking full advantage of opportunities in the first place. Applying this idea to Eagly and Carli's (2007) labyrinth metaphor, and to Biddix (2011) and Biddix's (2013) description of the lack of clarity related to any straight path to success in leadership roles in student affairs, one can derive the need to understand the imposter syndrome as one of the potential obstacles women experience on their route to leadership in higher education.

### ***General Theoretical Understanding***

In the original research of the imposter syndrome/phenomenon, Clance and Imes (1978) coined the term after studying over 150 highly successful women who have earned PhDs in different disciplines, are respected professionals in their fields, or have made significant achievements in their academic recognitions. Despite their legitimate, tangible achievements, these women lack an internal sense of success and accomplishment. Their experiences of being “an intellectual phony” overshadow success they have achieved, as they describe their inadequacy and fears of being “found out” as phonies, despite the tangible factors related to their ability to be successful (p. 4).

While noting that the Imposter Syndrome is difficult to overcome, Clance and Imes (1978) identified three types of behaviors, of which women can participate in one or all of them, and perpetuate their feelings of phoniness. While women have the perseverance to succeed despite odds that may be stacked against them, their feelings with the imposter phenomenon are strong enough to keep them from overcoming it and continue on pathways of success.

Behavior type number one is related to diligence and hard work. A fear that “my stupidity will be discovered” is persistent among individuals, causing them to work very hard to prevent discovery (p. 5). The underlying sense of phoniness remains despite individuals’ success due to that hard work. While individuals feel a sense of success initially as they achieve a benchmark or stepping stone, the perpetual fear that they will be “discovered” remains. An example of this behavior is when hard work and studying pay off with excellent performance appraisals or positive feedback from authorities. These feelings of success are temporarily reinforcing; however, the success does not

cover the underlying sense of phoniness the person experiences (Clance & Imes, 1978). Behavior type number two is centered on a sense of phoniness based in part in reality, as they do not live to their full potential in performance; downplaying their own contributions to an idea or holding back when knowing the correct answer. Fear of failure keeps individuals from participating authentically, thus perpetuating their lack of confidence in their inputs. An example of this behavior is a woman who remains silent in the face of an opposing viewpoint. The resulting sentiment leaves the woman feeling as though she might not have done well or be considered unintelligent if she shared her true feelings, thus reinforcing her lack in confidence in her actual viewpoints.

Finally, the third behavior Clance and Imes (1978) identify that the imposter syndrome among individuals who are experiencing the phenomenon relates to use of charm and perceptiveness to win the approval of superiors. The individual simultaneously believes she is not intelligent, but also that she is special and simply needs to have the right person believe in her and affirm her worth. An example of their type of behavior is that a woman identifies the “right” person to impress, and focusses on learning the best ways to communicate with that individual, ensuring that they will connect appropriately. The woman perceives that this relationship and connection will allow her true self to be discovered by the individual in authority. The reason this behavior does not eliminate the feelings of phoniness is because the individual only believes the superior appreciates their contributions because they have the established connection, and not because she is bringing good things to the table (Clance & Imes, 1978).

### ***Applications of the Imposter Syndrome***

While Clance and Imes (1978) initially studied the phenomenon in women, research has since identified that the experience of phony intelligence is not limited to only women. Much of the research about the phenomenon has discussed whether men or women experience being an imposter more. Furthermore, Dr. Valerie Young has categorized the phenomenon into five different types of imposters (Young, 2011). The perfectionist, the superwoman/man, the natural genius, the soloist, and the expert.

### ***Imposter Syndrome/Phenomenon in Higher Education***

Literature exists related to the imposter syndrome as it applies to individuals in particular fields and the influence the phenomenon has within those particular fields. Imposter syndrome has been documented across the professions in a variety of industries including K-12 education, health care, accounting, finance, law, marketing, and higher education in particular fields, such as medical education and engineering education (Arena & Page, 1992; Byrnes & Lester, 1995; Clance & Imes, 1978; Crouch et al., 1991; Huffstutler & Varnell, 2006; Mattie et al., 2008; Parkman & Beard, 2009; Zorn, 2005).

While studies of individuals in higher education and their experiences with imposter syndrome have been completed, Parkman (2016) notes that they are largely related to doctoral students and individuals in the academic faculty role, with few related specifically to the student affairs or higher education administrative roles. Regarding faculty experiences of imposter syndrome, Hutchins (2015) describes factors that faculty attribute to feelings of increased pressure related to the need to be perceived as intelligent in their roles. Additionally, Parkman (2016) notes the overall culture of academic work and the need for achievement and production of outcomes such as

research and publication, while also producing teaching materials and spending time with students, sets faculty up for experiencing the imposter syndrome. Hutchins (2015) also notes that faculty members' challenges in establishing a professional identity in the midst of constant need to produce and be evaluated perpetuates depression and anxiety among not only new professionals, but seasoned faculty as well.

Additionally, Hutchins (2015) explains that "faculty who persistently question their professional legitimacy are at higher risk for experiencing adverse psychological outcomes with implications to career retention, advancement, and job performance" (p. 196). Hutchins (2015) also notes that research has moved beyond simply identifying the fact that imposter syndrome tendencies exist; a need for identification of factors that encourage and perpetuate these feelings of professional inadequacy, as well as ways in which professionals can cope with these experiences, is necessary. To address those needs, Hutchins (2015) used a framework of identity development, and studied the events that triggered imposter tendencies and coping skills used by faculty members when they struggled. Hutchins noted that the experiences of the imposter syndrome were common amongst the participants; however, the individuals inaccurately attributed these feelings of inadequacy to negative self-talk, unrealistic expectations of success and failure, and external criticism. Perpetual self-doubt was enhanced by this external criticism, which is pervasive in the faculty employment experience. The result was for these professionals to experience negative work outcomes and perpetuation of burnout tendencies. Those who identified experiencing sentiments of being an imposter were less able to cope positively with setbacks in their work such as lack of grant funding, failure to produce publications, and negative evaluations from students (Hutchins, 2015). Hutchins (2015) also noted that

viewing the imposter phenomenon through the lens of identity development was helpful to highlight individuals' ability to cope as related to their self-development. Because faculty are generally highly accomplished academically and experience success throughout their educational experiences, they continue to seek external validation of their successes, which lends itself to external criticism becoming internalized.

One study by Crouch et al. (1991) explored imposter syndrome among females in what they described as "human services" roles within higher education, including deans, administrators, and counselors. This study compared those professionals with male banking professionals, and utilized their personality types related to their imposter syndrome scale responses. Crouch et al. (1991) noted through this study that the female higher education professionals were more likely to experience feelings of being an imposter. Expanding upon this research to specifically focusing on the mid-level practitioners on the pathway to senior-level leadership would be fruitful.

Additionally, Clark et al. (2014) studied the imposter syndrome amongst college research librarians, noting that participants described a tendency to second-guess their work and exhibit characteristics of perfectionism. According to Clark et al. (2014) these experiences resulted in behaviors that had an effect on work outcomes such as procrastination, stress, anxiety and demotivation. Participants described the culture of college library work to foster these feelings, while not attributing their own failures to that culture, but rather to their own feelings of inadequacy. The study determined that 1 in 8 librarians may be experiencing a significant degree of imposter phenomenon feelings. The focus of this study was on whether new librarians and seasoned professionals experienced imposter syndrome similarly, noting that the key for success is

to recognize that feeling inadequate does not mean the same as actually being inadequate. Clark et al. (2014) also recognized other factors that contributed to librarians' sense of inadequacy, such as lack of guidance from direct supervisors, negative work culture with peer interactions, high-pressure deadlines and expectations, and self-pressure for perfectionism. They also deemed connections with a mentor, especially in situations where a direct supervisor did not provide consistent feedback, as being helpful to individuals navigating their adequacy in the role.

In a study of career experiences among minority women in chief student affairs roles (Ralston, 2019) describes the phenomenon as a shared experience among those who were studied. Ralston notes that the participants had a persistent sense of needing to prove themselves and continue to earn their place in the role that they had already obtained. Ralston (2019) also notes that future research related to experiences of individuals who are the “only” or few among their peers, especially in leadership roles, are necessary to continue understanding how to prepare individuals for such roles. A focus on the influences of the imposter syndrome on this experience of women in higher education and student affairs roles will continue to tell that story.

### ***Support for the Imposter Syndrome***

Research related to the “what now” and how to address the phenomenon among individuals regardless of the profession they are in will allow individuals to prepare for progression into and through leadership roles. Hutchins (2015), Parkman (2016), and Clark et al. (2014) describe possible strategies for identifying, supporting, and coping through impostor syndrome tendencies for individuals to understand, both as professionals, and as supervisors of individuals within their fields. Within the faculty

experience, Hutchins (2015) notes that individuals should identify specific external triggering events that occur and perpetuate individuals' feelings of inadequacy. In doing so, the individual can prepare for those feelings, and acknowledging them in advance of the antecedent will allow for normalization of the experience. Clark et al. (2014) noted the importance of mentorship and collegiality among librarians. The study demonstrated the need for individuals to experience support externally so that when feelings of being a phony come forward, they are able to seek guidance and reassurance from others that they are indeed on the right track.

The literature paints a picture of factors that may influence individuals' experiences as they progress through next levels of their careers; however, further inquiry is necessary to specifically explore these factors among female mid- to senior-level student affairs administrators as they traverse the career ladder. Of note, how does the imposter syndrome/phenomenon factor into that experience among this particular group of professionals?



## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Methods**

This chapter outlines the purpose of the study, research questions, research design, research design rationale, IRB and ethical considerations, site, sample selection, instrument, data collection methods, and data analysis.

#### **Purpose Statement**

The career progression experiences of female leaders in higher education who do not come from the faculty ranks warrants continued inquiry. Understanding the career navigation experiences of these individuals, especially the factors that influence their success and perceived success once they approach and ultimately reach senior and executive levels of leadership, is necessary to ensure that the student affairs profession continues to achieve legitimacy within the higher education enterprise. Additionally, understanding the experiences of professionals who take on the senior and executive levels of leadership from a foundation that does not include the faculty advancement process, is noteworthy for not only institutions of higher education, but also the graduate programs that educate individuals who seek administrative work in colleges and universities. Ultimately, gaining understanding of individuals' experiences with career progression to senior and executive levels of leadership will help institutions to support future and current executives/leaders to be successful and feel supported as they navigate their careers. Due to the nature of the roles these individuals assume, discovering ways to support them as they grow into their positions, and ultimately once they reach those roles, perpetuates the profession of student affairs as a whole, influences the success of the entry and mid-level professionals they lead, and ultimately the students we serve. While

some literature exists related to women in student affairs roles (Ford, 2014; Parkman, 2016; Ralston, 2019) further understanding of the specific factors that influence career progression among those women, especially as they approach senior and executive level positions within the higher education enterprise is needed. Additionally, discovery of implications and ways to support women as they seek such career paths is necessary.

### **Research Questions**

Three research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How do women describe their career progression experiences through the ranks of the student affairs profession to mid-level, senior and executive levels of leadership?

RQ2: How does the experience of mentorship impact women as they progress through the ranks of the student affairs profession to senior and executive levels of leadership?

RQ3: How does the imposter phenomenon impact women as they progress through the ranks of the student affairs profession to senior and executive levels of leadership?

### **Research Design**

A qualitative research design is most appropriate to address the research questions within this study.

### **Research Design Rationale**

#### ***Qualitative Research Design***

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), “We conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored. This exploration is needed, in turn, because of a

need to study a group or population, identify variables that cannot be easily measured, or hear silenced voices” (p. 45). Creswell and Poth add that qualitative research allows the researcher to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study” (p. 45). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note that “a central characteristic of all qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds” (p. 23). Researchers interested in the following items align with qualitative inquiry: how people interpret their experiences; how they construct their worlds; and what meaning they attribute to the experiences. Meaning-making is a focal point of such research, as participants provide the researcher with their experiences and how they interpret those experiences for meaning in their lives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study meets these criteria, as I asked participants to consider how they experience the phenomenon of career progression, which is a problem that is complex in nature. I sought detailed understanding of this issue, which cannot be established without in-depth investigation into the participants’ actual experiences.

### ***Case Study Approach***

According to Creswell and Poth (2018) “case study research is defined as a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time” (p. 95). Creswell and Poth added that Merriam and Tisdell (2016), Yin (2009), Baxter and Jack (2008), and Stake (1995) approach case study research as a methodology. A case study is an appropriate approach when the researcher has “clearly identifiable cases with boundaries and seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the cases or a comparison of several

cases” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 99). Furthermore, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note that when a case is not limitless and the number of individuals who fall within the boundaries of the criteria is limited, a case study can be achieved.

### ***Multiple Case Study Strategy***

According to Baxter and Jack (2008), if a study contains more than a single case then a multiple-case study is required. The determination to use multiple cases in this study is based upon the desire to explore differences within and between cases. A multiple case study will allow the researcher to analyze within each setting and across settings. The goal of this strategy is to replicate findings across cases. Comparisons between these cases is imperative to this strategy, which implies that cases must be chosen appropriately; the researcher will predict similar results across multiple cases and/or predict contrasting results based upon a theory (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). According to Yin (2009), multiple case studies can be used to either “(a) predict similar results (literal replication) or (b) predict contrasting results but for predictable reasons (a theoretical replication)” (p. 47). Of utmost importance within use of this strategy is the identification of the bounded system (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). The bounded system of the multiple case study strategy allows the researcher to define the parameters by which the research identifies cases. These boundaries include who is and who is not included as part of those parameters, so as to ensure that the study’s questions to be answered are not too broad and allow for in-depth exploration of the phenomenon studied (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). The case study approach was appropriate for this study, as I sought understanding of a specific group of people who fit within the bounded system described

below. Studying the experiences of women who meet this criteria, a specific group within the student affairs profession, allowed for illustration of the topic of progression using a descriptive mode to “shed light on a larger class of cases” (Yin, 2009; Campbell, 2015).

For this study the boundaries of the cases include the following criteria:

- Women who:
  - Graduated from the student affairs graduate preparation program at a Midwestern Research University.
  - are demonstrated leaders who have taken on vertical roles with increasing responsibility, additional accountability, and expanded influence.
  - currently work in a senior through executive-level position within an institution of higher education. Senior through executive-level position is defined as director-level or similar, or higher.

### **IRB & Ethical Considerations**

Creswell and Poth (2018) call upon the considerations outlined by Weis and Fine (2000), who note that researchers must:

consider ethical considerations involving our roles as insiders/outsiders to the participants; assess issues that we may be fearful of disclosing; establish supportive, respectful relationships without stereotyping and using labels that participants do not embrace; acknowledge whose voices will be represented in our final study; and write ourselves into the study reflecting on who we are and the people we study. (p. 53)

Creswell and Poth (2018) also explain the ethical considerations that I must take as a researcher as I engage in the entire process of this study. Contrary to popular belief, ethical factors must be considered by the researcher during every phase of the process, not simply in the data collection and analysis phases.

As the researcher, I completed the required CITI training certification in preparation for completing this study. I submitted the study through NU Grant, received initial feedback for corrections, and it is approved through the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's IRB. I will followed the IRB protocol, including collection of informed consent from all participants. Data will be stored on a private server accessible to only myself and my committee chair. I will keep participants anonymous and coded throughout the data analysis and results discussions.

### **Site**

All interviews were conducted via zoom regardless of geographic location of the participants to ensure consistency of the interactions.

### **Sample Selection**

A purposeful sample of ten women who graduated from the identified student affairs preparation program, who work in at least an assistant director-level position in an institution of higher education were the subjects for the study. Additionally, these women have all taken on vertical roles with increasing responsibility, accountability, and influence. I posted an initial request for participants on the program's Facebook alumni group for self-identification of interest in participation. Once the individuals indicated interest, I contacted them directly via email to coordinate participation.

### **Instrument**

To perform this research, I developed a 20-question, semi-structured interview protocol with probes and follow-up questions (Appendix A). I utilized this type of interview with "how" and "why" questions to give participants the space to share the story of their experiences in their own words (Yin, 2009).

## **Data Collection Methods**

For the first step in the data collection process, I submitted the proposal to the UNL Institutional Review Board. Upon approval from the IRB, I began the process of participant selection. Once I identified all participants, I sought their consent as noted through the IRB process and scheduled and executed interviews. Each semi-structured interview lasted between 60 and 120 minutes.

The purpose of interviewing is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective; it is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **Data Analysis**

To answer the research questions posed in this study, I recorded participant interviews through zoom. I then uploaded the recordings to ECHO 360, which provided an initial transcript of the interviews. I then re-watched each interview and edited the transcripts accordingly. I then sorted, coded, and called out themes to form general lessons learned from studying the cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I printed and read each transcript, highlighted codes, and used an excel spreadsheet to list codes. I then sorted them into tabs that represented different themes (Appendix D). Identifying and sorting words from each interview allowed me to create a systematic approach to analysis of the participants' responses.

## ***Data Analysis Strategy***

Analysis for a case study “consists of making a detailed description of the case and its setting” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 206). To analyze this research, I utilized the steps described by Creswell and Poth (2018) and Yin (2009). For case study research that

involves study of two or more cases, Yin (2009) described cross-case synthesis that results in discovering similarities and differences between cases. By utilizing a word table to display data, the researcher can see those differences and similarities.

Furthermore, the researcher then develops naturalistic generalizations by applying what they learned from the cases to other similar context or other similar cases in a different setting (Yin, 2009). Following these steps, identifying certain aspects of the case and description of the case as a whole become the “facts” of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### ***Researcher Bias***

As Creswell and Poth (2018) explained,

the researcher discloses their understandings about the biases, values, and experiences that he or she brings to a qualitative research study from the outset of the study so that the reader understands the position from which the researcher undertakes the inquiry. (p. 261)

As the researcher, I brought experiences to the study as I also interpreted and analyzed all data. Therefore, as the primary interpreter of that data, themes and results are skewed through my personal lens. To address this bias, I used semi-structured interviews that allowed me to become a listener in the conversation. The participants told their stories based upon the prompts I asked, and I used simple probes to facilitate. I did not provide my own personal experiences or opinions in the interview process.

### ***Establishing Validity***

Member checking or seeking participant feedback provides the study participants opportunity to verify the findings and the way in which the researcher interpreted them. Stake (1995) noted that of key importance is the participants’ ability to take part in this aspect of the study. As such, I asked participants to play this major role in the study



through reading transcripts of interviews, emergence of themes, and reflection on how the emerging data reflects their actual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I gave participants the opportunity to meet with me following receipt of their transcripts, and provide any feedback regarding their responses and my interpretation of their stories.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results and Analysis**

In addition to providing an overview of the purpose of the study, the research questions, and resulting themes and sub-themes of the research, this chapter will outline characteristics of each participant.

#### **Participants**

Ten participants were interviewed for the research, all of whom identify as female. All participants attended the same master's degree program in student affairs as part of different cohorts at different times. In that program, they worked as graduate assistants in at least three different student affairs service areas. They bring student affairs experience ranging from Assistant Director to Director to Senior Director and Vice President of Student Affairs. One participant traversed the student affairs pathway in higher education to a senior-level role and now works in education for a non-profit organization. The names identified below are pseudonyms that I assigned for each participant to maintain their anonymity.

#### ***Andrea***

Andrea currently works as the chief executive officer for a non-profit organization. Her career began in a community college role before she decided to attend the master's degree program. Her first professional role was in admission counseling and she progressed to other student-facing student affairs roles. As her career evolved, she eventually assumed a leadership role managing teams in different student-facing organizations before assuming her current role.

***Bridget***

Bridget currently works as a director in a student services department, leading a team of staff, as well as in a campus-wide leadership position. She entered the master's degree program immediately following completion of her bachelor's degree. She began her professional career as an advisor in a position that evolved into a director role. She has worked at multiple institutions throughout her career thus far.

***Carly***

Carly currently serves as a director in a student services department. She worked in a different industry prior to completing the master's degree program. Her first professional role in student affairs was as a career counselor and she progressed to assistant director and ultimately director level positions at multiple institutions before assuming her current role.

***Ellen***

Ellen currently works in athletic administration as a senior member of university leadership. She entered the master's degree program following her bachelor's degree and worked in academic advising and athletics in her initial professional position. She moved to multiple institutions where she assumed progressive leadership roles in various student services departments.

***Gina***

Gina works as a director in an academic affairs department. She began the master's degree program after completing her bachelor's degree and worked in a student affairs department immediately following her graduation. She advanced into assistant

director roles in student services departments at multiple institutions before taking on her current role as director.

***Haley***

Haley works as a director of student judicial affairs, leading a team of professionals. She entered the master's degree program immediately after graduating from her bachelor's degree. She began her professional work in housing and progressed into judicial affairs roles at multiple universities.

***Jane***

Jane works as an associate director of admission. She worked briefly in student affairs after graduation from her bachelor's degree. She then attended the master's degree program before working in admissions roles professionally. She progressed to her current role where she leads a team of professionals.

***Joy***

Joy works as a Senior Student Affairs officer leading the institution's student affairs departments and serving as a member of the institution's leadership. She completed the master's degree program immediately following her bachelor's degree, and progressed through roles in a variety of student affairs areas, including housing, advising, and student life.

***Lynn***

Lynn works as a senior leader of student affairs for her institution, leading a team of professionals. She began the master's degree program immediately following her bachelor's degree and worked at multiple institutions in a variety of student affairs areas, including student leadership and academic advising.

***Maren***

Maren works as a director of a student affairs department. Before pursuing the master's degree program, she completed a terminal degree in a different field. Her first professional role was in academic advising, and she has progressed through multiple student affairs roles before assuming her current position leading a team of professionals.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of study is to examine the lived experiences of women who graduated from a student affairs cohort program, and have traversed the career ladder to mid to high-level student affairs leadership and administrative roles within higher education. This study seeks understanding of women's career experiences, including their vertical movement to roles of increasing responsibility, wider influence, and greater accountability. Exploration of this progression, and the influences on their experience of lateral movement, including the impostor phenomenon is presented.

**Research Questions**

Three research questions guided the study:

- RQ1: How do women describe their progression experiences through the ranks of the student affairs profession to mid, senior, and executive levels of leadership?
- RQ2: How does the experience of mentorship impact women as they progress through the ranks of the student affairs profession to mid, senior, and executive levels of leadership?

RQ3: How does the Imposter Phenomenon impact women as they progress through the ranks of the student affairs profession to mid, senior, and executive levels of leadership?

### **Overview of Themes and Sub-Themes**

This chapter provides the experiences of female student affairs professionals as they progress through their careers through themes and sub-themes resulting from their shared stories. Three themes and ten sub-themes emerged as outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1**

#### ***Themes and Subthemes***

Theme	Sub-theme
1. Influence of Relationships on Experiences of Progression	a. Mentorship b. Peer networks c. Loneliness and the concept of the island
2. Navigating the structures of Higher Education	a. Organizational structure as barriers or support to advancement b. Lack of formal advancement structures c. Profiles of the individual women d. Managing up, down, and through
3. Experiences of the Imposter Phenomenon	a. Transitions to leadership roles b. Navigating the feelings of Imposter c. Concept of worthiness

### **The Influence of Relationships on Career Progression**

Consistently, women articulated that supportive relationships were influential in their journey and played a significant role in their stories of career progression. These relationships, while varied in nature and in timing throughout their careers, played an

instrumental role in their experiences of navigating everything from their decision to pursue higher education and student affairs work, their initial jobs, and ultimately their progression to higher-level positions. This section elaborates on the relationships theme through information shared by the women in this study. Their experiences include sub-themes of (a) mentorship, (b) peer support, and (c) loneliness and the concept of the “island.”

Participants referred to the people who were influential in their careers, attributing their successes to individuals who served as sources of support on their journeys. Participants experienced that support in the form of people who expressed belief in them and their capabilities as career student affairs professionals and leaders. Additionally, participants described relationships with people who challenged them and helped them to stretch beyond their expectations of themselves. Many participants formed these relationships beginning with their undergraduate education during formative years in which they were learning about themselves, their strengths, and their desires for their future careers. The influence people had on them during this time supported their growth and helped to form their initial pathways to student affairs as their profession.

Relationships with leaders and peers during their master’s degree program and beyond to their first professional jobs helped to set the foundation for their eventual progression to leadership roles in student affairs. As they progressed through their career, participants described the value of strong relationships with peers who shared the same type of work they performed. Once they assumed leadership roles, they noted a change in the nature of their relationships and the needs they had for connections with others to help them navigate difficult aspects of their work. Still recognizing the importance of

connections with others in fostering their success, participants described the difficulty of finding such relationships due to the complexities of their roles, often noting feelings of loneliness.

### ***Mentorship***

Participants described that relationships both formal and informal contributed to the success of their experiences as they entered the student affairs field and as they progressed into first roles and eventually into advanced roles. More important than whether they called the relationships mentorships, or simply a relationship of some sort, was the importance of the connections they described with people who encouraged them at various levels of their career journey.

**Decision to Enter the Field.** Every participant described their decision to become a student affairs professional as being influenced by a person who recognized their strengths, their passions, and their desire to help others. Those people ranged from friends, family members, or peers, to professionals within higher education such as faculty members or administrative professionals. These stories shared a common thread of the significant impact that relationships have on women who decide to pursue student affairs as a career from the beginning of their journeys. Every participant described this dynamic. Bridget shared her story of deciding to become a student affairs professional, saying:

[L]ike for so many who enter the profession, one day he [a mentor figure] said why don't you do this [work with students] for your career and I was like what is this? And he was like, work out of a college campus. And I said, okay, how do I do that? And then from there he told me about an info session for the master's degree program and it led me to researching programs around the country and really kind of helped me set my sights on looking at that as a next step rather than working right away.



She went on to note the significance of that mentor's encouragement "for him to really point out that I could be a big contributor to the student affairs industry . . . I took it very seriously hearing it from him." Carly noted a similar story, saying, "I was initially like most people in the [student affairs] field. No one ever thinks that this is where they're gonna end up." She added, "I had a friend in [the master's degree program] who called me up and said, hey are you interested in you know, going for your master's degree? . . . So I applied and it literally just fell into my lap." Similarly, Ellen described a meeting with a "friend of her mom's . . . who was [a key figure] and encouraged me to meet with him. He said, Ellen, I think you might like student affairs." Ellen noted that following the meeting she said, "Oh, these people who work at colleges, it's like you could do this for a career."

Additionally, Jane described her experience of working as an intern with a key campus leader. Jane noted, "[She] said Jane, you've been working with me for a year doing this kind of work, you still don't want to go into higher ed? And it hadn't even dawned on me that it was like a career." Jane added, "I realized everyone I was working with as an intern had chosen the profession and I was like, oh yeah, I really do like this. I really like what I've been doing. And so that was really when I started looking at master's programs and pursuing the career." Gina shared her experience, noting, "I needed a job and shared that with a faculty member who was very engaging; and so one day after class she said, why don't you come and work for me?" Gina added that, "I didn't know exactly what she did but it turned out she was actually in a [senior leadership role in administration]." Gina explained that the opportunity she had with that faculty member changed her perspective on her career. She said, "I didn't even know you could

go to graduate school for this work, and I'm like, how do you do this as a job. I didn't even know it was a profession." From there, she applied to the master's degree program.

Maren had a similar encounter with a student in the master's degree program. "He said, do you know what the student affairs graduate program is, and I was like, I had no idea it even existed." She went on to add, "I knew I liked the work I was doing as a student worker but hadn't realized I could do it professionally until I met him." Lynn shared her discovery story, noting that a family member reached out to her unprompted. Lynn said:

She went to another university and called me out of the blue. . . . She said, I met this woman who does what I think you need to do with your life. And I was like, okay. She didn't even know what it was called and just knew it was something about working on college campuses. . . . She told me you need to call this person [at the university] and inquire about the master's degree program.

Lynn said, "From there, I met with my academic advisor and made a plan to apply to graduate school." Joy described her experience of knowing that she wanted to be an orientation leader as a college student, which is where she met a professional who told her she could do student affairs as a career professional. Joy said, "[This professional] said I heard you say you want to be an orientation leader for the rest of your life. . . . And she said these magic words to me: Do you know that this is a profession?" From there, Joy made a plan to go to graduate school for student affairs and ended up in the master's degree program. Andrea had a similar experience, noting, "Student affairs found me. I didn't really know what I wanted to do. . . . I knew I really enjoyed working with students . . . when I found [the master's program]." She added, "[The director of the program] provided me the best opportunity, and, I am one of the luckiest humans to be able to learn from the best person I've ever experienced in student affairs."

**Support from Individuals in Leadership Roles.** As participants shared the stories of their careers from their advancement experiences, they consistently described the influential people who supported them along their pathway. They explained that the people who supported them and helped them grow into new positions were instrumental in their progression as leaders. Additionally, those individuals helped them to learn the roles they assumed and provided necessary guidance and camaraderie. Identifying individuals who had their backs as they advance in their careers, participants consistently noted the impact of individuals in positions of leadership and influence on campus. The value participants placed on having a person who they felt supported them as they advanced was significant. Participants identified these relationships, both formal and informal, as formative in their experiences of progression.

Maren described her relationship with a supervisor who helped her navigate her role while simultaneously preparing her for a future role by bringing her along in different situations. Maren explained:

It was actually about a year where we met weekly. Like, I can look back on it now and realize that it was almost like an apprenticeship, like, she really let go of the reins. And I had to think through things, talk through things like, how would you do this? Take the first stab at different decisions. Then she started taking me to different meetings around campus to help me meet others and learn.

Bridget also described her relationship with a supervisor who not only supported her in her current role, but also provided opportunities for growth, and supported her after their formal relationship ended. “My first boss here, I definitely would not be where I am without her.” Bridget added:

It’s her really trusting that we had each other’s confidence. When she was my boss, I’d come with a list and she really had to unwind me. It was almost like she was my training therapist. Well, maybe it was just creating the space and more and more I’m prescribing to that. Like I think it’s just creating space for someone

and she's done that for me. There's no agenda and I feel comfortable bringing up the hot button issues especially the challenges I have [in my own department] that she is a good neutral person.

Bridget also explained that this person encouraged her to take on additional roles to continue her growth. "I had [her] support to pursue a [leadership role on a committee] and her support in that which you know to her might not have been a big deal, but just her giving permission knowing it could be a time commitment I think started [her support for me]."

Jane discussed the relationship she had with a boss who supported her career growth from early on. "[She] was a big one, especially early on. I don't know this officially, but I really feel like she probably pushed for me to get that original job." Additionally, she described the relationship she has with her current supervisor and the impact he has had on her career. "I can't imagine working for anyone else, and if he ever leaves, it will be tough for me to adjust to a different supervisor. He has just been a big mentor. He is the one who taught me and encouraged me." She added,

He is always there saying I've got your back. While at the same time challenging me to look at things differently . . . I think he really believes in me and pushes me to do better. He has played a huge part in me progressing here.

Carly described her experience with mentorship as informal rather than formal, noting that the support she had was instrumental in her early success in her leadership role. She noted:

[She] was always my go to person. I am a door lurker, like the person who is going to walk down the hall and knock on the door and ask questions instead of sending an email. [She] was so great about supporting that. She was really involved in organizations and introduced me to the people I needed to be connected with. . . . Not only did she answer your questions, she was a great facilitator.

Carly further explained:

My current supervisor, who I absolutely love, has been great. He thinks flexibility is important and models that. I think where I have found my best successes when I've had that trust and that I have the empowerment to do what I think . . . it's build trust, set big goals, establish the needs, knowing people do it in a way that they would want it, not the way you necessarily want it. Great. It doesn't have to be done your exact way or vision, but trust that in their empowerment they lead to success. That has been huge and I appreciate that type of leadership from him.

Gina described the relationship she had with a well-known leader at her university who supported her to learn her job with the potential to grow into a leadership role. "I was mentored to do the leadership stuff. So I was in meetings with him and I was doing things toward the end that a director would do, as he was transitioning to retire." Gina further elaborated, "I do think that mentorship, and the experience I got, made me more qualified than anybody else [seeking the director position]. Lynn described a similar supportive supervisory experience. She noted:

When I look back [over my career] I felt like I was able to make the biggest difference and feel the best, like just as a human, when in those settings where I had supervisors who felt like colleagues and not like bosses who were in the trenches with me that was needed, but were also willing to lay out the pathway and say go, run and do whatever you need to do. How can I support you?

Hayley explained that navigating a new job at a new institution came with challenges she didn't expect, and forming new relationships was part of those challenges. She explained, "I am kind of figuring out who I can trust. I've kind of had to figure out who are those people I can go to with concerns . . . one of those people is actually doing a lot of coaching for me." She added, "[B]ecause she is someone who is older than me and has been at the institution for a long time, she is connected with a lot of people so that helps [get me connected]." Hayley further explained, "At my old institution, people knew me and knew my work, so it is hard to have to regain that credibility with people."

**Impact of Adverse Relationships.** While participants described positive support that came from relationships, some participants also noted the impact of adverse relationships with leaders in their experience of progression. Lynn shared that her experience of progression included navigating a difficult situation. She said:

I want to be positive about it . . . however I will tell you that I got caught in a yucky organizational situation about five years into my job. [My supervisor and a senior leader] were butting heads and because the [senior leader] wanted to reorg my supervisor out of the organization, and I was seen as socially connected, I got lumped in with getting him out . . . I got really stuck because of our organizational dynamics. . . . So I feel like that really stalled me out for almost a decade of my career.

Gina described her first professional role, and the relationship she had with her supervisor and the overall culture of a toxic department. She explained that relationship and overall experience as being influential in her career as she progressed to her own leadership roles with more responsibility. She said:

The fact that I was able to do that first position was great. I had a horrible, horrible experience. It was toxic, a toxic situation. And I probably was not as mature as I needed to be. But I just had a really bad experience. So, I learned an enormous amount by messing up and by [seeing that leadership style firsthand], but it was such a dysfunctional department.

Lynn shared the dynamic of the relationship she had with her supervisor and the influence that relationship has on her role as a leader. She explained,

My supervisor has needs [that don't align with my work]. It's not that he's not actually very smart. . . . He's not a student affairs professional, and so the kinds of things he focuses on just drain my time because it's not what we actually need to be working on.

Hayley shared her experience with transitioning to a new leadership role at a new university. For her, the lack of relationships at that institution influenced her success in the transition. She said:

Moving into new roles [at my previous institution], I think, was a little bit easier because I knew so many people. I knew the politics and the power structures and I knew how to navigate everything. I knew the culture of the institution. And so that made all those things a lot easier for me [there]. Coming into a new place, I really didn't know anyone in terms of, like, even having colleagues that were there. I'd had some colleagues who previously worked there, but, you know, it was a lot of brand new forming of relationships and figuring out where are the pitfalls that I need to avoid? What are the politics? Who are the people that I can trust? You know, who all do I need to even be talking to? What do these relationships look like? Relationships with other departments are totally different where I'm at now than they were [at my previous institution], which was a really crazy experience for me. So it's taken me a long time. I still feel like those are things that I'm feeling out. And so I feel like I should have figured that out a long time ago.

### ***Peer Support***

The importance of relationships with individuals who do similar work was consistent as participants described their experiences with progression. Participants explained that having peers who traverse similar experiences in their work provided an important level of support as they advanced in their careers. The camaraderie of others who knew what they were going through and who they trusted to seek advice were influential in participants' progression journeys.

Maren shared that she was welcomed by a group of women who did similar work to hers in different departments across campus. "Feeling part of that group, I still feel like a newbie, but they welcomed me. They speak up in meetings so I felt empowered to do so as well, like I know they support me. So if I speak up in a meeting, I know they have my back." Maren added that, "I look to [a peer] because I know her answer is always going to be awesome." She also noted that, "I give [a peer] a lot of credit because our conversations helped me to see that I was managing up. I wasn't seeing it for myself but having her recognize it gave me confidence that I am doing more than I realized."

Additionally, she noted,

the women in that group really took me in and that, like, you can do this. And they have been so supportive and not even treating me like a newbie, like getting my opinion on things. And that really helped me feel as capable as everyone else thought I was.

Ellen described the relationships that were influential in her progression, noting that having formal and informal networks of support are influential in her career advancement. She described the advantage of being part of a leadership network of peers within her field. She noted,

I am able to call directors around the country and get their perspective on a situation. And at this point in my career, when I talk about mentors it is not so much a mentor but a colleague . . . as my ear to listen.

Hayley also described her relationships with peers. She explained:

While I haven't had a lot of mentoring relationships . . . what I would say is that I do have a strong network of peer to peer relationships. For example, I have a group chat with some other folks who are at other institutions that we can say hey, I've got this situation. What do you think? So that network has been very helpful and a lot of that network is within my state. I feel like I am connected with people who are all over the state that I can call, as well as former colleagues . . . my support and learning [comes from those connections] as we do presentations together for conferences and can ask questions of each other. . . . I really consider mentorship from this peer group of people where we meet up at conferences and we'll talk about our experiences, and I learn a lot from them and the things that they're doing. . . . And I try to provide a supportive role to them, as well.

Jane described a similar experience with professional organizations and peer connections from other universities.

I have gotten really involved in [a professional organization] over the last few years. I was on one of the leadership boards. . . . So it has just let me meet other people who have similar experiences at similar institutions.

Jane noted the importance of having a colleague with whom she had a strong relationship. "I knew I could always bounce ideas off of her. She gave me the confidence and encouragement to know I should put an idea forward." Similarly, Carly described a peer relationship that shaped her as she grew into new positions of greater influence and



responsibility. She said, “It’s almost like we were each others’ mentors in many ways. We view things similarly but we also have very different perspectives. And so it was nice to sometimes get someone who thinks in a different way.”

Andrea shared her experience with peers with whom she formed relationships throughout her career. She explained that those relationships transcended her at new organizations and helped her have support from others as she transitioned to new leadership roles. She said:

Being able to have people along the way that you can pick up the phone and say this is the situation I’m faced with now. Here’s what I’m thinking. Am I off base or is there something I’m not thinking about? You have built these relationships with people and that is the key. I guess when you think about it, that is the key. These people know you. They know the gifts that you have. They also know your blind spots and you have that trusting mentor that you can ask questions and say I screwed up. I don’t think people can get through their career successfully without having that.

Gina shared that she believes the key to her success as she has advanced was in maintaining relationships with others with whom she has worked along her career pathway. She said, “In my opinion, this work, it’s all about relationships. . . . Finding people that you can trust, being authentic with, and building those strong relationships are what brought me to this place and what gives me these opportunities.”

Similarly, when asked about her success in her career to this point, Ellen noted the importance of making connections in her work. She said:

Relationships. It’s all relationships. . . . I learned from [a supervisor] that you demonstrate that you are a colleague with [every constituent on campus]. . . . So I was very intentional . . . to establish relationships. My best girlfriends were the directors of two [different areas]. . . . But I think the relationships across the campus were what ended up being the reason [I was called] about an [important position] when I was needed. My advice is that you just have real authentic relationships that are not meant to be connections. They’re just simply care and concern for what each other are doing in our campus. Also so when there is something to work through, we have those relationships in place.

### *Loneliness and the Concept of the Island*

Participants presented another perspective regarding the importance of relationships in their career advancement experiences, noting that once they reached a certain position level, relationships changed and were harder to navigate. Especially as individuals advanced into roles of greater responsibility, most participants described their experience of loneliness as they worked in leadership positions. After noting the importance of having strong relationships with others, the lack of relationships presented clear challenges for individuals in their leadership roles. Bridget explained that the dynamic of her relationships shifted once she advanced into a leadership role, namely, as she began supervising professionals who used to be her peers. She said:

What can I share? What can I not? I want to be candid and transparent but I certainly also want to keep trust and take pride in being someone people can trust. To me that's where it is lonely. Who are those people that maybe you can talk with about those topics that keep you up at night? But that might be topics you can't discuss with others. I don't know. That's where I feel the most lonely.

Lynn shared a similar experience noting that she is in a leadership position, managing a large team, including professional leaders. While she works with many other people, she shared that she does not feel as though she has the close relationships she needs to feel supported and to be successful as a leader. She noted:

I think I'm in a gap right now where I don't feel like I have mentors. I think there's a hole of middle management. . . . It's a lonely spot. I think in this kind of middle management area these women that I knew from before I could call them, but I would have to explain a lot about the nuances to get the mentoring I feel like I need right now. I would say that is the biggest gap in my professional job every day.

Additionally, she explained that, "I think the higher up you get in our business that community disappears."

Gina had a similar experience with loneliness as she advanced into a more senior leadership role. She shared:

You have these relationships that you have built with professionals across campus or whatever community you are part of. . . . You doing your job builds credibility, and you're doing it well and people say, yes, you've done well . . . but what's hard is, then you get this, kind of a more senior leadership role. And I'm not even that senior. I'm the lowest senior level. But it becomes extreme, like all of that you used to have as supports goes away because you're in charge and you're the leader. So you're expected to do it by yourself and also build a whole new group of folks that are the people who are appropriate for you to be with as a cohort, your support people.

Joy shared that perspective when she described the loneliness of holding a senior executive level position. She said:

It is the loneliest job. I can't emphasize it enough. You can't be friends with your staff. You can't be friends with faculty. And in this day and age, you might get lucky and have one faculty friend who will keep your confidence. But that's unlikely, because they have things they need to do politically on a campus and having access to a high level administrator that puts faculty in a difficult situation that can compromise them. So then, you're left with the other people at the executive level and those people don't have any idea what we do, they don't understand. . . . They cannot understand that I'm the person around the table who gets the awful phone call and that my job is different. And I don't truly understand their job either.

Joy also added, "With the level of competition at that executive level, it is really lonely. I hated that, I hated it so much, and I hated that kind of isolation. It made the hard times harder."

Gina expressed that same concept related to her peer group changing when advancement occurs, noting that true peers do not do the same work as her at that level.

You may or may not have relationships with [your direct peers]. You know, I'm part of the executive directors group. . . . People talk to you because of [your formal position] but I am a more longitudinal person and build relationships that last. I don't really care what your rank or title is. . . . So it is a challenge for me at times because I feel lonely. There's not necessarily a cohort of people who get what I'm doing, what I'm experiencing.

## **Navigating the Structures of Higher Education**

All ten of the participants in this study discussed their experiences navigating the nuances of higher education as a staff professional. These women's experiences have taken place in a wide range of higher education institutions, representing community colleges, liberal arts institutions, and research universities. Regardless of the particular institution, they all described their experiences of navigating the culture and nuances of those settings as they learned their jobs and ultimately advanced at that institution or elsewhere. These experiences shed light into what is necessary for women to navigate and position themselves accordingly within those environments. While each type of institution brings different nuanced structures depending on the students they serve and the mission of their institution, commonalities exist in the need for women to learn and navigate the environment in which they work. Among those considerations include (a) the organizational structure as barriers or support to advancement; (b) managing up, down, and through (c) lack of formal advancement structures; and (d) profiles of the women.

### ***The Organizational Structure as Barriers or Support to Advancement***

Lynn described her perspective regarding the dynamics of staff leadership in higher education. She said, "The culture of higher education in general is not collaborative in that way. . . . It comes from an inherent structure of decentralization. Possibly from scarcity of resources." Lynn added that,

The higher you get in the hierarchy. . . . That 80/20 rule of how you spend your time, eighty percent of my time is putting out fires so I don't have space for strategic thinking or growing my department, and yet that is what is expected of my role.

Regarding a different perspective of the organizational structure, Joy shared how the structure and expectations of higher education, specifically in student-facing roles, can take a toll on individuals attempting to manage work-life balance. She said:

But the truth is, at the end of the day, that we are in an industry that encourages and rewards people, particularly in student affairs. Though I think they do this for faculty as well. I've never been a full time faculty member, and so I can't speak to it. I can, however, say that I observe it. Um, that the encouragement is that you will give your whole self, your whole family, or your health, your time that it is a boundary list. Because our client is boundaryless we do not serve one student, we serve all students.

### ***Position Titles***

Gina described the dynamic of having a certain title and the influence that title can have on the work she is able to accomplish. She noted:

It is great to be a director, you get some bonuses and there is some power, but you know. I want to push back on that a little bit because it doesn't do anyone any good [to focus on titles]. I have access to things and one would question why. And there is certainly a trickle down effect there, how I can open doors for other people [from this place]. I think about that a lot. How do I elevate my team so that they can have access to more power and resources? So I work really hard to make sure that they do and I don't hoard the power but share it out. I know my team is better when they have the freedom and agency [that provides].

Lynn shared an experience with discrepancies among individuals at her institution who have the same job responsibilities but different position titles. She explained,

I'm a layer that a lot of our colleges don't have. So a lot of colleges go Dean, Associate Dean and then these directors of student service units. So career services advising whatever. In two of our colleges, there's a senior director that lumps together career and advising. Well, I'm a senior director, but I have these full units and then I'm an added layer in that whole hierarchy.

### ***Lack of Formal Advancement Structures***

Participants described the difficulties associated with desiring to grow in their careers, noting the organizational structures within higher education do not provide natural step-wise advancement opportunities. Most participants noted that while they

entered the field with a desire to serve students, they also possessed the skills, expertise, drive, and desire to continue career progression. The reality of higher education as a whole, as evidenced by their particular institutions, does not necessarily provide such opportunities without having to change universities, departments, roles, or leaving the field altogether. Joy explained that the structure of higher education, namely in the student services world, is not conducive for professionals to experience formalized advancement. The flat nature of most organizations does not support climbing a ladder.

She said:

What I wish is that the executive director and that associate dean and the associate vice president line paid enough money so that people who were well suited to that level could stay there or that those jobs were not all night work all the time. Like, I wish there were a professionalization at that level of student affairs that would allow fabulous people to ascend to that space and to spend a good 15 years in that space and be able to raise a family and be able to have a life and be able to do some of the well-rounded things. They say executive director at some of the bigger schools. Unfortunately, we don't do that because the people who have that expertise are the ones we also need in emergencies, and unfortunately the emergencies do not happen at 9:00 in the morning. So I think it's a real miss in the field [of student affairs]... I think that people see the vice presidency and see that it is not fun.

Joy continued:

It is also that the institutions and industry places value based on how much money they make and the amount of money you make means that you are better able to retain at a position for a longer time. And that is one of the things that we are missing [in student affairs]. We don't pay in a way that is commensurate with the kind of hours and the kind of expectation and the trade-off that you make in your real life. Then, what I think happens is that we start to see an exodus because we have this incredible skill set. We have degrees that can command a salary elsewhere and so we can shift into some of those other industries. So it is an interesting problem for our profession.

Lynn explained her experience with the flat organizational dynamic that exists in student affairs administration. She said:

I got really stuck because of the organizational dynamics . . . I feel like I got really stalled out for about a decade of my career. Looking at my resume I feel like I got to do a lot of cool things. I would say my resume is very broad in terms of types of things, but it is very flat in terms of organizational growth.

She further elaborated that much of the growth she did experience was connected to people in leadership who fostered an environment of growth and learning, not because there were opportunities inherent in the position structure. Additionally, if a supervisor does not recognize the need to support growth among employees, those opportunities are more difficult to obtain. She explained:

I had a supervisor who was very empowering, very growth oriented. She would think about how she could set me up to have new experiences [within my role]. . . . For example, she would say, for your next step, you're going to really need to understand budgets, let me get you some budget experience . . . you're going to need to supervise some folks. Let me get you some people to supervise. She was not just for show, but because she genuinely believed in my development as a higher education professional. Then on the converse, I had supervisors who were really kind of about putting the thumb and keeping me in my place and like, don't overstep your place. Stay in your lane.

Hayley also described the work she did to position herself for new opportunities.

This positioning often came from her own volunteering and taking on work that was above and beyond her full-time role. She explained:

I think for me so much of my progression has been additional things I have sought out. So, you know, when I look at my resume, I'm like, wow, there is a whole bunch of stuff I have done that it was basically like volunteer. You know, things to do above and beyond, taking on additional roles. . . I was an unpaid volunteer [for a leadership role] and again just kind of an extra thing that I was either given or took on. So there were a lot of things like that that I think helped with my progression.

Hayley also described the role of connections throughout the university and the role they played in navigating her leadership role. She explained, "I think it's just trying to figure out where I do have that power and authority. How do I try to use it

appropriately to advocate for students; to advocate for my staff and try to leverage that social capital and that kind of thing.”

Maren also described advice from a mentor who noted that advancement takes time because learning the expectations of a job in higher education takes time due to the cyclic nature of the work. She noted,

I remember [him] saying it kind of takes three years in a position. The first year, you're just like learning it and going along. The second year was another cycle to see it again, and the third year was like, you've got it and you're making it your own.

### ***Profiles of the Individual Women***

Participants described characteristics about their strengths, their leadership styles, and the different lenses they bring to the work they do. These characteristics helped to shape their experiences as they advanced and helped them to navigate their careers in unique ways.

**Career Orientation.** Gina said, “When I was younger I thought working harder was the thing and doing all the things and you know, just through maturation, I know better now how to be efficient and effective.” Jane described her desire to achieve and how it shapes her work and her leadership. She said:

I always want to beat our numbers. . . . I'm a very numbers driven person. And when I say our numbers like, I don't just mean our enrollment numbers. I mean, like, I want to beat the number of applications that I had for this scholarship competition last year, or I wanna beat how many students we had attend our [admission visit days]. You know, from last semester, I'm very much a, okay, we did this. So now let's go, like, here kind of person. So I think I get motivated by, like, trying to beat myself, and challenging my staff to do that too. I always tell them I don't ever want to be the person who says, oh, well, we always did it this way.

**Leadership Styles and Strengths.** Participants described their approaches to leading others and many participants also noted the strengths that guide them as they



work with other professionals. Without explicitly being asked about them, multiple participants mentioned their Gallup Strengths in conversation, noting the way those strengths shape how they navigate their careers and their advancement (Gallup, 1999).

Gina explained, “It took me too long to realize that empowering people and supporting people and giving them the resources they need and getting out of their way is an enormous leadership ability and skill.” Lynn shared that although in her academic learning and throughout her career, she has studied leadership theory, she believes it is difficult to translate to real life. While she uses that background to form her approaches, it all comes down to maximizing the expertise of those around her, including her team members. She described the importance of the people and what they bring to the team. She said, “One of my directors recently said you know, regardless, we never have to wonder that you care about us. And I think about that a lot and it sums it up for me. I may not be the best strategic leader for our unit, but I think about [what she said].”

Maren described her approach to leading her team as a servant leadership style.

She said:

I really identify with [servant leadership], like thinking back when I was a manager at a [fast food restaurant]. I'm not going to ask anyone to do something that I won't do . . . I think part of that comes back to, like, some of this responsibility and strengths of, like, I want to be able to explain it. I want to be able to know that it's done well. And so I also want to be able to do it first, like, help work out some of the kinks. And where are the pitfalls, but also trying to be cognizant of not doing things in a micro manager manner, unless it seems like something's falling apart. But I have a really great team, and almost everyone holds up their end of the bargain and does their things.

Lynn also shared her perspective regarding selecting candidates for new positions, noting the importance of balancing strengths of the team. She shared:

I try to lead like to be the best by having expertise across the range of our areas. We can have different strengths. So I try, you know, like when we're hiring a new

person, I really pushed my team to try to think outside of those normal boxes, like, Okay, this candidate may not have experience that we thought we were looking for. But what about the thing that could be developed in that way?

Joy shared that as a scholar of leadership theory, and having taught leadership courses to students, she sees her style as representing pieces of many different theories.

She explained:

I can see pieces of most, not all of, the leadership styles in my employment and working with people. So I mean, I think that I could lean hard into a number of them and make the case based on what I know about them. I can tell you what I have been told, and I can tell you the one that I naturally reach for and the one that I naturally live when I remember reading it and feeling like it was putting on a comfortable jacket when I used to have to teach it.

She continued:

I think the one that most resonates with me personally that I most enjoy and that I emulate is the concept of servant leadership. Those 11 characteristics are so critically important to my practice, I speak in that language. It feels like home. I would say that beyond that the authentic, really traditional, authentic leadership capital and true relational leadership different than like leading through your connections with other people that relationship leadership, relation of leadership with the five characteristics, those are all ones.

Joy further elaborated:

Because it is such a wonderful thing to be told that that when the folks, when they learn about transformational leadership that they think of me. I don't know that my personality would allow me to claim that. But it is one that I have heard enough to know that other people see that and I appreciate it. I think as a manager that that it is really important to me, to think in terms of my relationship with that person being ephemeral, and that I have a responsibility to leave them better than we found one another.

Bridget described her strengths as they related to managing her professional relationships. She explained:

It's like when people say, I know why I want you there, and that's always nice when we can kind of identify that in each other. I have the relationship building influencing strengths in my top five, which are kind of what people see is the fluffy or the people pleasing and can get in the way in different ways. But, for her,

it's executing some of the strategic thinking. So I think we do a pretty good job balancing each other's strengths.

### ***Managing Up, Down, and Through***

Participants noted the challenges and opportunities that come with managing people in higher education. This significant aspect of their job responsibilities takes much of their time and often depends on the institution, department, or structure of the organization. Lynn described a situation in which she was asked to take on a new leadership role and manage a team. She explained, "I was kind of thrown into this HR mess with employees who aren't performing well. . . . It was rough, the whole thing was really rough."

**Experiences of Supervising Personnel.** Gina described, "When I took over as director I tried to implement things and I had a terrible personnel situation when I started. Somebody I hired was a terrible fit." Hayley noted her collaborative nature and explained how that played a role in her supervisory experiences, especially when taking on an existing team. She said:

I think for me, my general leadership style is pretty collaborative, so I feel like a lot of it for me was the kind of collaborative approach and identifying what I need to be taking on and what I need to be delegating. So working with [my employees] to say these are the things you are responsible for and these are the things I'm responsible for allows for clarity and collaboration. How do those things work together and how do we have that good working relationship between all those pieces?

Hayley also described the balance that she has to navigate between managing people and completing the daily work required. She noted:

My staff know that I'm someone they can come to if they need to just vent and talk to someone about what is going on. I will base my action on what they need [at that time]. I ask, what do you need from me to be able to be successful. I think one of the things that I am working on because I have personally been in some not-so-great supervisory relationships; they've been all about business. And I

used to be very much a developmental supervisor and that because of kind of the influence of those supervisory positions, I found myself creeping into the same habits that my supervisors were using with me. I remember meeting with my program coordinator. . . . She came to me at one point and said, hey can we [work on this together], can we read articles to learn about that? And that was kind of a moment for me where I realized I had lost some of that development and that my supervisory relationships have really become more about business and getting stuff done than they had become about developing them as a professional. So I feel like that is something I'm working on putting back into place now. We will always figure out the business side of things.

Carly shared her team approach to supervising a smaller team of professionals who get along very well. She said:

As a team, let's talk about our priorities and where we need to go, you know, what makes the most sense to try? So even in those, some of those big decisions, try to get them a part of that decision making you get feeling like they have a voice and understand everything that's going on. So I'm more of an over sharer. Like, this may not be relevant for you, but I'll just let you know what's going on. I want them to feel autonomy that they have ownership over their project and just, you know, building that collaborative relationship. And you're my team. They all have very different personalities, but everyone works really well together. So I've been lucky. I have a very good team here.

Bridget explained that her supervisory structure changed when she assumed an additional, campus-wide role, allowing her to focus on supervising fewer professionals. She noted:

There's just an assistant director and associate director that supervise a large share of, like advisers and career folk. And so that's been a change. This last year, I have three reports and I don't have eight anymore. And so I think, had that not been the case, this additional role would definitely not been something I probably could have done.

Lynn described her experience with supervising others, noting that while her strategic planning and hopes for the work they do are always a priority, she always returns to the human aspect of the work she does as a supervisor, as every decision impacts a person. She also described the dynamics that come with managing people,

noting that the work of supervision is in and of itself a large job, often overshadowing the strategic planning needs that come with leadership roles. She said:

I can't always put those pieces together because I get very bogged down in the people. The people themselves and what is going on with them, and you know, decisions and how they impact all of these people and not necessarily their job, but like, their humanness . . . at the core of it, it's about the people and how can we empower them to shine.

Lynn further explained:

I have experienced navigating two different types of employees, rock stars or superstars. . . . Superstars are like ladder climbers and rock stars are dependable like you can always just count on them. And I think I've come to appreciate having both in my team. . . . So I have stars in my team I need to help them climb. Trying to develop them wherever fits for them. So for some of them, they want to hunker down and be the best at their current job. And so how can I support that? And for others, it's helping them shoot up like being a shooting star and climb up those ladders and for better or worse, it's about the people.

She added:

I have learned though, that I can't let sucky staff stay in their position because that hurts the other people, and I did not know that well in my younger professional days. So I've had to let some folks go, and that sucks because I do care about the people. But there is the bigger mission behind it.

Joy shared her experience with how she approaches managing a team. She explained:

I blossomed once I had, in my self-confidence to be able to kind of run my own stand and to create something together. And by that time, I think I had really come into my own in recognizing that my strengths were really as a servant and that when I did everything that I could to set up my staff to be successful, that I was really claiming the ground that felt most comfortable to me. And that's not true for everybody. But it was very much true for me, and once I could be there, it would be good. And I know that people talk about that like, find somebody who [makes you better]. I espouse that deeply that I find people who not only make me better but invite me to do the same.

She further elaborated:

When I think about who have been my best fits as a as a staff member, they have felt like partners because we were partners, because together we made leadership happen. You know that leadership is not being a leader as a person, but leadership is an entity created by at least two people, whenever two or more gather then

something magic happens. . . . And so to understand that, the leadership that we created really came from being able to knit together and that happens with two people who are able to be vulnerable with one another. That's my biggest and most important [factor]. And then the other is that I love them. I love I love my staff. And I could, of course, name them because, you know, that's how it works when you beat yourself up, I could name probably the handful of people who have hated working for me and they share a particular set of characteristics, but there are a few of them, and it has hurt me deeply when I have realized that someone did not like either me personally, which always hurts your feelings. I don't care who you are, but that they hated working for me, and sometimes those things would get conflated, and that was hard for me to do and to deal with. That was when it was always better. When I realized that later in the relationship, then earlier. But it's happened and I think that typically happens with somebody.

Jane shared her supervisory experience and her approach to leading a team as being influenced by the dynamics of the people on the team. She shared:

It started out with just two [supervisees] I now have six on my staff, and, two of them are guys. Which, when I got one guy on my staff that immediately changed the dynamic, which was hard for me. I wasn't really sure how to supervise a male, or how to, like, relate to him. So now I have to, and the one guy and then another is a female who had been out of any job market for at least a decade, and she's older than me. So I think there's just like a lot of dynamics now that I don't think I would have been able to handle in 2012; the 2021 version of myself. I think I can handle it. I lean on [my supervisor] a lot for support and just my other central staff members.

**Terminal Degree Dynamic.** All participants have earned at least a master's degree, and about a half of them have or are seeking a terminal degree. Even though all of these individuals already have at least one advanced degree, those who do not have a terminal degree recognized they either want to seek it, or feel the need to, due to the structure of higher education. Carly described her situation, noting that she is the only one among her siblings who does not have a doctoral degree in some field. She clearly expressed a desire to complete a PhD, but noted the time constraints she currently has balancing work and home life. Carly said, "I love my job and what I'm doing and I don't

actually have to have a [doctorate] but it's like it is a personal goal at this point. . . . I also want to make sure I'm doing it for the right reasons." She added,

Mentally, I'm just not sure I can add that stressor at this point. . . . Timing is never perfect. There's just a part of me that knows I'm an overachiever and would need it to be perfect. And I don't have time for that.

Similarly, Hayley noted that she feels discouraged when she sees that others have a terminal degree when she knows she has as much experience or more than that individual. Hayley said:

I think I know one thing I do kind of struggle with a little bit in terms of my peers in you know, not having a doctorate because there are a number of peers that are going and getting their doctorates. I have two people on my staff right now. . . . But I also just really know from going through my master's program that I'm going to have to be very, very ready before I do that. I'm just personally not ready yet but sometimes it's hard to see other people that I'm like, man, they're a doctor but I'm not. You know, they've managed to do it but I haven't. . . . But I think on the other hand, I do feel like I've really accomplished a lot.

The concept is even a dynamic that those who already have a doctorate or are seeking a terminal degree have to navigate. Bridget discussed this concept:

We needed someone to step up [into a new role] and [a senior leader] knew I was finishing my PhD in the summer, and never had I thought timing would be so important because it was so weird to me, or maybe serendipitous. Maybe the stars aligned, but also just that the differential was what maybe what helped them justify giving this opportunity to me over anyone else who was qualified. . . . I knew I wanted to get [the degree] and that it would help in the future, but it was pointed out to me that I got this opportunity over anyone else. . . . But I certainly hoped there were other things, too.

Maren holds a terminal degree and talked about how that fits into her work identity. She said, "I am really glad I have a [terminal degree] because it gives me [credibility with faculty]. But I cringe when I put my letters behind my name in an email or on zoom."

Gina, who was in the process of completing her terminal degree, described the dynamic she experienced when she was the only one without a doctorate. She noted, “Working in [an academic setting] I am the only one who didn’t have a PhD. And yet I had the experience in my niche and I was the best candidate. But I certainly feel that sitting around the table.”

Jane shared a different experience, noting that she is not interested in pursuing an additional advanced degree due to her career goals and lack of necessity. She said:

I don't feel like I need, a higher degree. Um, especially since I'm not looking to go anywhere else. I guess I was looking to move up somewhere or go to another institution. I think that I would probably start looking at a PhD program of some kind. Um, but I'm good right here.

Lynn shared that in her current role, her terminal degree is not necessarily valued. She explained, “My colleagues don’t believe my PhD is real because it is in the soft sciences. It’s my colleagues who don’t understand why we would be doing academic advising because we are not faculty.” She added, “It really piles on to needing self-efficacy and adding on to the feeling of plateau within my career.” Lynn also described the reasons why she sought a terminal degree in the first place, noting the support and encouragement from her parents growing up, but also the dynamics associated with higher education and degree attainment. She said:

When you grow up in an environment that’s like, you will get a doctorate, you can pick which field it is in because it wasn’t because you had to have a doctorate for prestige. It was because my parents believed that was freedom because you have the most control of your life. The more education you get. . . . It’s also this push to drive like, which is the pinnacle of our field, having a PhD. . . . It’s like this achievement culture that we’re raised in and then I was a hyper version of that.

**Family Considerations.** Bridget said,



Parenthood has been such an interesting thing . . . I think I will just be pickier and I think that I will be more intentional because the Bridget before kids didn't have to think about it and would do something for the challenge. Now I need to be more intentional with my time.

Maren described the importance of having a supervisor who has a family and thus understands the flexibility that is necessary for people managing their family commitments. She said,

One of the benefits of having [her] as my boss is that she does prioritize her family. So she may need to take off early to [pick up kids]. So now I feel more comfortable [knowing I can do that].

Similarly, Hayley described the need for supervisors to understand and support flexibility so that she can support her family when needed. She noted, "I have had supervisors that have been both ways, and that is part of the reason I sought a new position. I was missing things with my kids that I did not want to miss and I needed support for flexibility."

Lynn explained that being able to navigate a leadership role while also being a mother comes with challenges that those who are not parents may not understand. Having a supervisor who is not a parent highlights those challenges.

Joy described the nature of a senior-executive role and its impact on the whole family. She said, "That job is not just my job, it's the job of the whole family. They sign up for it just as much as I do as I become the job."

### **Experiences of the Imposter Phenomenon**

According to Clance and Imes (1978), despite high qualifications and clear demonstrated ability to hold such roles, individuals' confidences are affected by a constant fear that they will be "found out" as incompetent or unworthy of their roles.

While the questions asked of the participants did not overtly ask about the concept of the

Imposter Phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978), many of the participants described experiences they had with factors associated with the phenomenon. Some participants explicitly identified the concept and explained their experiences with feeling like an imposter in their roles. Participants described these experiences as taking place at various points in their careers, but largely came through as they progressed into roles of greater responsibility. This section further explores the concept of the Imposter Phenomenon as it relates to participants' perceived experience with it (a) in transitions to leadership roles, and (b) how they navigate those experiences of feeling the imposter.

### ***Transitions to Leadership Roles***

Many participants described their transitions when they assumed new roles, largely in leadership roles, as being challenging. These challenges occurred despite their being selected to the position based on qualifications they brought to the position. Gina said, "Probably my first year as director, when I was feeling very much out of my element, didn't know what to do. Thoughts I really had to wrestle with, probably a really necessary growing opportunity for me." She added, "That dissonance was really essential and it helped me to kind of feel more comfortable and confident."

Looking back at the beginning of her leadership position, Gina said, "I think about that year one, and [I thought] yeah I am completed unqualified. What did I sign up for? You know, the imposter syndrome thing."

Lynn described her current role, and noted, "I have been in this new role for over two years and I still feel like I'm kind of looking over my shoulder like, am I even good at this? Should I even be doing this?" She added, "I have glimmers of, oh yeah, I am good at this. Oh yeah, this is why I was called to this work." She further explained,

It really depends on the day. I don't know exactly why some days feel more like this than others. . . . My immediate thought was of the imposter, like, am I worthy to be at the table? Am I worthy to be the [leader of this team with this title]?

**The Seat at the Table.** Some participants shared experiences with feeling the need to advocate for themselves, their expertise, and credibility; ultimately needing to justify their presence in certain situations. These experiences are in line with Imposter tendencies described by Clance and Imes (1978). Participants' experiences were also associated with the dynamics within their department or organization. Gina described her experience saying, "I was kind of being prepared for this role. So I was definitely in spaces where I was very much the lowest ranking person and occasionally I think people were like, what is she doing here?" Gina added, "It was my supervisor trying to give me exposure and introduced me to this whole new land of people who I would potentially be serving with in the future." She further explained:

I do not have low self-esteem, but I don't think it's like raging out of control self-esteem either. Sometimes you realize you're the only one in the room without a PhD and you realize you want to say something about diversity equity and inclusion. That's the crap on this campus. But, you don't have tenure and you're the only one who doesn't and you could get fired tomorrow. That is a time when I feel insecure.

Joy described her experience of advancing into a leadership role within the institution, noting to dynamics she had to navigate to make that change.

Lynn described:

I'm not at the table. So, you know, the pandemic is a great example as we're shutting down and deciding what to do. The person that is my supervisor doesn't have a student affairs background. He's a [career professional in his discipline]. So when he's thinking about what we need to think about, it's not that he's not thinking about good things, but he's missing a piece of the puzzle. He can think about it from a curricular standpoint. That's his expertise area. But not about the actual students who just got an email that said, [with policies that affect them]. There's nobody at the table thinking of those implications. . . . [Decisions have] already been decided by the time it comes down.

She further explained:

So not being at the table, it sucks again that self-efficacy and that feeling like I'm good at my job, and I have something to contribute part, but equally it feels like. . . . It feels like there is the human impact on me feeling like I should be at the table. But then there's also how it manifests is like I can't serve my team well, because they don't have a voice at the table, you know? So I've been at the table where I was a symbolic member and not really at the table, you know what I mean? Previously I've been in this scenario where you're at the table and you're seen as a colleague and you're seen as a valuable contributing member.

**Landing the Big Roles.** All participants have experienced the transition to leadership-level positions. Those positions range from mid-level to senior-executive level. Every participant mentioned that they at one time in their career have considered what it would be like to assume a senior leadership role in their field. While all participants have the education, experience, and career-mindedness to seek senior leadership positions, many expressed hesitancy to do so. This dynamic reflected fear of what the role would do to their ability to balance work and life; self-doubt about their ability to manage the scope of what it entails, and concerns about the institutional dynamics that exist surrounding such roles.

Bridget explained, “Honestly I see [senior executive leaders] and think I don’t even know if I want to see my life like that. And I think that is a deterrent.” She further elaborated, “Honestly, it’s that you see what and how they work and then you wonder would I do it differently. And the answer is probably no, so how would I [be able to] do it.”

Similarly, Lynn shared her perception of her original goals compared to her current perception, in which she considers the realities of senior-executive work, and the potential lack of balance that work would bring. She said:

I always thought I wanted to be a vice president of student affairs, and also, I've always wanted to be a faculty member, which I know are not the same thing. But those two things have always been the end goal. . . . I don't know if I still want that or not. That's the interesting thing is that I don't like the lack of clarity I have whether I want those things. It's just right now, I'm pretty content. My current position in that, at five o'clock, I know that my inbox is always going to be full and some balls are going to get dropped. I didn't have that perspective when I was younger.

Lynn further elaborated that she recognizes through her experience that she still desires connections with students to anchor her to the original calling. She said:

I see [a peer who is in an executive role] and his reality. He deals with the yuck that I can't even fathom. How are we as a university going to deal with policies and ripple effects of [incidents that occur on campus] and if it's not handled right and the political fallout that results. You know, the news station calling and that kind of stuff gets on his plate and that's his whole day or week. He spends a lot of time on budgets, policies, and that is the stuff I do care about, but it feels too far away from the student in front of me, and I think I've had the clarity that if I need to have my bucket full, I need a role where I can still see actual students occasionally. So right now I don't meet with students, I don't advise any student organizations, but my office is in the student services suite so [students] are constantly around and I get to see them.

She also added her perception of success has evolved as she advanced in her career and navigated balancing motherhood and work life. She said:

It is hard to define success for myself. I will say that the silver lining of the pandemic has been that it has given me perspective of these little humans I am raising are turning out really good. And so it's not that I come to acknowledge success in my profession, it's because it's that I've begun valuing my professional identity less and less over the years, that I, for better or worse, because of this other role of being a mom, has been elevated that it's become a more important identity to me than my professional identity.

The participants who have navigated progression to a senior-executive level of leadership have distinct experiences with ascending to that position. While each role is distinctly different, similarities exist between these experiences of progression the women experienced to get there, as well as the transition to the roles themselves.

Andrea, who is currently serving in a senior executive role, noted that she sees talented women avoiding the big roles. She noted:

I also understand that a lot of people intentionally do not want to be that out front role. It's hard, it's definitely exhausting, and definitely makes you wonder, am I on the right path career wise? Am I the right person at the right time for the organization?... I mean, it does make you question and ask a lot of questions of yourself, and that is exhausting.

Joy shared similar thoughts about talented women who do not even desire to seek the big leadership roles. She said, "The fact that you have young, talented women who are the future of the profession saying, no thank you, I don't even want to consider that, that is a huge problem for the profession."

Ellen expressed her desire to seek the most senior leadership role within her career niche, and even recognized that a university presidency is not out of the question for her career. Ellen described:

I was in a professional organization meeting and they asked the question of who wants to be [senior executive] someday? And I immediately raised my hand and realized I was the only one and thought, oh my gosh I need to put my hand back down. . . . So we went around the table and asked each person their thoughts and why they're not considering that possibility. They are happy being in their current roles for the rest of their careers, which is great, we need that. So I feel overstated when I know that I am seeking that next role.

Joy described her experience as a senior executive leader and her expectations as she took on that role. She said, "I had paid attention to other people who had been successful. I was very confident in my ability to be successful, and I still am. I am a terrific [senior executive leader]." She further elaborated,

I did not have the kind of affiliate needs met that were important to me. I didn't realize how much of that imagined imaginary job that I had in my 19-year-old head that I wanted to do. And it's a real shame because I think it happens to a number of people [in these roles].

### *Navigating the Feelings of Imposter*

While participants described influences the imposter phenomenon has on their experiences of progression, they also described the ways in which they work to overcome those feelings to be successful in leadership roles. Many participants noted back to the relationships and peer connections as helpful in providing confidence and support to do their work. Many participants also noted the experience of intentional support structures, such as engaging professional coaches as sources of support to help navigate their roles. Additionally, participants described the importance of remembering their purpose and the reasons they sought careers in higher education in the first place. Consistently noting the desire to help others and influence the lives of students.

Lynn described her experience engaging with a professional coach to help navigate her work. She said:

I've sought out some professional coaching in the last year so I have a coach the university pays for that I meet with every other week. . . . I am also in this women's coaching group that I meet with monthly. It's helpful but it isn't necessarily the mentorship I need for my career, but I am really trying to make those connections [with others doing the work].

Gina shared a similar experience, describing her engagement with a professional coach. She explained:

I was able to have a personal coach that I engaged and that was really, really helpful. It was helpful for me to kind of talk through some of these things and help understand where I was going, how I was developing, and what I was feeling at the different stages of my progression. For example, the first couple of years, especially the first year I felt like I was running around and everything. And my coach said yes because you need people to know that you are here. This is your job. This is your role. Everybody sees you. Everybody knows that you have these connections. And I said, but I am sick of that and she validated that yes, you are in your next phase. Now you need to be strategic about where you partner and how you partner. So then I was able to be more thoughtful about not running myself ragged [to prove myself].

She further shared that after she connected with the professional coach, her outlook changed in her approach to her leadership role. She said, “From there, I was able to calm down, focus, and say okay, what’s next?”

Lynn noted that when she questions her role and her purpose, she remembers why she decided to do the work in the first place. She shared:

[This work] is really at the core of who I am. One of my favorite former supervisors just said, student affairs isn’t something that you just do because a lot of people . . . fall into it for different reasons. She’s like, it is your heartbeat, and it is. I know calling has a religious connotation for a lot of folks, but it does feel like a calling to me like this is what I was meant to do. And on days that are tough, I go okay, I’m either not good at this or I just need a change, but then I look at the world and say what do I really want to do. And it comes back to I want to work with college students.

She also noted, “I never question leaving [the profession] because I felt this duty. Not necessarily to the institution, but to the profession. Like, this is my profession and I need to [this work].”

Carly explained that her experience with factors associated with the imposter phenomenon are more like moments of experiencing doubt and uncertainty in her work. She shared:

So it's like if you [can have] those moments of imposter syndrome, but I'm not sure I've had as much as you know, much as some others in the profession. . . . I don't know if it goes back to that self-assurance piece of things, and I guess I've kind of always been confident in myself in a way. So just being who I am, you have taken some calculated, even though I'm not a risk taker.

### ***Concept of Worthiness***

Clance and Imes (1978) described individuals’ sense of worthiness as part of the Imposter Phenomenon. Participants shared varying perspectives regarding their perception of whether or not they were worthy of performing the work for which they are



responsible. Lynn shared her perception on worthiness as she reflected on her ability to advocate for her team and her expertise in the college she serves. She said:

The immediate thing I thought of is the imposter, it really depends on the day, and I don't know exactly why some days feel more like this than others. Belief is in my top five. And so that purpose, that pull to the mission, makes me feel worthy. I told my supervisor last week, I said, I literally know more than any other person in our entire college about retention. I am the expert in our college. He just looked at me and I just looked right back at him like it's a fact Nobody, nobody in our college knows what I know about it. So I feel very worthy in those ways. But then I don't . . . like if I had the right leadership skills, if I could actually do this effectively, then I could clear the path better for my team. My [professional staff] wouldn't have to come to me with the same kind of issues over and over again because I would be able to clear those pathways for him.

Bridget explained her perception of worthiness, noting that while she does know she is qualified for the roles she holds, it is often difficult to navigate continually proving her worthiness. She shared:

I think the greatest compliment we can get in student affairs is being given more responsibility. But then, the responsibility is to be, someone that can stand up for yourself and know your worth. And that's a challenge because there's lean resources is in our industry, and we all get into the profession to help others, and that can really that takes time. Being a helper, it might mean 80 hours a week, and it's not because someone is telling you to do it. It's because you want to do it because you are a helper and you want to help. And that's maybe the danger, I think, in some of the cycle. But I do think I am worthy. I think it just didn't happen maybe on a time frame that I would have put out for myself.

Maren explained that she constantly feels the need to do more to ensure that she is making an impact on her staff, and as a result, the students they serve. She said:

I don't feel like I'm doing enough. I don't feel like I'm making a big enough impact. And I worry about all of my advisors that, like the ones that live alone, that they're too lonely and the ones that have families that they're trying to juggle all the things and I just don't feel like I appreciate. Like, show them my appreciation enough, like, am I doing enough. But then every once in a while they stop in and thank me and tell me what a great job or how much they appreciate me, and I'm like, holding back tears, and think, I'm glad you see me that way. I need that.

Jane described her perception of worthiness by connecting to work she does to keep the team organized behind the scenes, noting that because she has done the work for so long, her value is crucial to the team, but many may not even know the importance of the work until she is not there. She shared:

For the most part, I think there's little things that I do that nobody else knows, that I do. And if I were to leave, they'd be like, Oh, I guess [Jane] did that, but it's stupid little stuff that doesn't really matter but helps us stay organized. Like, so one example is we have all these calendars that we use to keep everybody organized. And one of the calendars keeps track of, coverage. . . . I don't even think it's really technically part of my job description anymore. But I just I kept doing it. . . . You know, but it keeps the office going, I guess. Yeah, that's a huge job. That's a big, crucial piece of all of it.

Carly described her perception of worthiness as it related to holding herself to a high standard in her work. She shared:

I mean, everyone has a bit of that imposter syndrome. So there was a time where I did. I probably don't feel it as much where I don't belong because I think it's just in general if you hold yourself to a highest standard and try to do your best, that's all you can do . . . you see things come your way. So there are times when it's that I hope I don't disappoint or, I hope I know more than I don't know. I don't feel like I belong here. I think it's more of the standards piece of things. So it's like if you have those moments of imposter syndrome, but I'm not sure I've had as much as some others in the profession.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions and Recommendations

#### Introduction

This chapter includes conclusions and recommendations resulting from findings presented in Chapter 4. The chapter connects these findings to the literature review outlined in Chapter 2. Additionally, the research questions used to frame the study are explored, along with conclusions and recommendations. Finally, implications for student affairs preparation programs and university administration are offered.

#### Research Questions

*Research question 1: How do women describe their progression experiences through the ranks of the student affairs profession to mid, senior, and executive levels of leadership?*

Participants shared similar stories regarding their career progression experiences beginning with their decision to pursue a career in the field of student affairs all the way through their experiences of vertical movement assuming roles of increasing responsibility, wider influence, and greater accountability.

*Research question 2: How does the experience of mentorship impact women as they progress through the ranks of the student affairs profession to mid, senior, and executive levels of leadership?*

Participants consistently shared the importance of relationships, both formal and informal, in their careers. The women described relationships with mentors, peer networks, colleagues, and other leaders as being instrumental in their ability to navigate their career progression. The connections they had with others who were experiencing

similar work supported their growth. Similarly, perceived lack of connections with others who did similar work demonstrated challenges for individuals while they navigated difficult, high-level responsibilities.

***Research question 3: How does the Imposter Phenomenon impact women as they progress through the ranks of the student affairs profession to mid, senior, and executive levels of leadership?***

While the participants were not explicitly asked to describe the imposter phenomenon, most of the women shared experiences that are consistent with the imposter phenomenon. Namely, as they assumed leadership roles with progressively more responsibility, participants described the transition to those new roles as a notable time where feelings of doubt and lack of worthiness appeared.

## **Conclusion**

The literature review outlined in Chapter 2 described topics associated with considerations for women as they progress through their careers in student affairs; these considerations include experiences of career advancement and progression paths in student affairs and higher education, factors within career development such as mentorship and job satisfaction, and career experiences of female leaders in student affairs. Additionally, the literature review explored research related to the imposter phenomenon among professionals in other fields. The results of the study are consistent with concepts in that literature.

According to Ford (2014), as women progress through their careers in student affairs, they can expect to encounter both positive and negative experiences that will influence that progression. Additionally, Miller (2007) noted that some of those

experiences include building a strong professional network of colleagues, embracing and leading change, and continuing education and professional development. Furthermore, while the exact pathway through advancement and progression through a career in student services is not explicitly defined, neither are the ways in which one is to obtain the competencies necessary to be successful in the field (Biddix, 2011; Cooper et al., 2016; Muller et al, 2018). Biddix (2011) notes that before his study three decades of research were yet to outline a defined pathway to the senior student affairs role. Rather, the focus on functional areas has provided an incomplete picture of a blueprint for successful navigation to and through mid-level and senior student affairs roles.

Both the literature reviewed and the women leaders in this study identify that competencies necessary for professionals are not outlined explicitly for individuals seeking this work; however, the participants in this study bring similar strengths and characteristics that allow for navigating the uncertainties of transcending leadership roles in higher education. Many of the participants described self-awareness, utilizing the language of their Gallup strengths to describe how they approach their work (Gallup, 1999). This awareness of how strengths help them to navigate their roles allowed them to collaborate with others, both as leaders of teams, and as senior members of leadership at their universities. Additionally, participants described the dynamics regarding completion of a terminal degree. While every participant already achieved at least a master's degree, whether or not they held an additional advanced degree was a factor to them in some way; whether they acknowledged that they did not have a desire to pursue additional formal education, or they were in process of completing a degree, or they already held a terminal degree, participants discussed it as a key factor as a staff member in higher

education. While a terminal degree is not a consistent requirement for all leadership positions, it is present on participants minds in some way. Even those who held degree were hesitant to “flaunt it” in certain settings for fear that it would make them seem flashy, or conscious of whether it was a degree that was “good enough” in their setting.

According to the women leaders in this study, navigating these dynamics requires women who are not only self-aware, but also resourceful and able to foster the relationships necessary for success as leaders in the field. The literature as well as the participants in this study consistently described the people factor of this work. The importance of relationships with others: supervisees, peers, mentors, supervisors, professionals at other institutions, leadership at the institution, transcends all factors that support success among progressing professionals. Those relationships are important from as early as the decision to pursue student affairs as a career.

Participants consistently described authentic relationships and their role in career progression. As a manager, Carly explained, “the nice thing about [leading a team in student affairs] is that I really do want my team to bring their authentic selves. And that is what they are able to do.” She described having those relationships in which team members can ask for what they need because they feel comfortable with being honest with her was crucial. Fostering that trust was a consistent theme among participants. Gina shared that after she managed a difficult personnel situation, her connection and success with her team shifted when she was able to form authentic, supportive relationships with individuals. She noted, “It required me to kind of be a better leader. Really dig into who I was. What are my values? What do I believe? How do I articulate that? Luckily, that

person in just leaving was a good learning experience. After that, I really felt like I kind of got into my groove.”

Participants shared consistently that relationships with mentors, both formal and informal, supported their success as they grew in their careers. Clark et al. (2014) described that professionals deemed connections with a mentor, especially in situations where a direct supervisor did not provide consistent feedback, as being helpful to individuals navigating success in their roles. Because those who supervise student affairs leaders are not necessarily experts in student affairs, but rather, academic administrators from their particular discipline. Participants described this dynamic as especially true. Jane explained her experience with mentorship noting, “I think that's part of being a mentor is being able to look at both sides of somebody not just being a motivator, but also being like let's bring you back onto solid ground kind of person.” She added, “If [my mentor] weren't here, I don't know that I would have progressed in our office as much as I have.”

Similarly, Bridget described the mentorship she experienced as being influential in her progression, noting that she would not have sought certain advancement opportunities had it not been for her mentor's encouragement. She said, “It really is because of [my mentor] that I am here. She has done so much for me during my time here and I don't think I would be where I am now without her.”

In addition to relationships with mentors, participants described peer relationships as having influence on their ability to navigate the difficult path of progression to and through leadership roles. Hayley shared, “I feel like a lot of it has really been on me and then kind of that peer group who I think we all kind of just bring each other along, which

has been helpful because I haven't really had those mentor relationships. And I haven't had as many of the strong supervisory relationships . . . that group has been what has really helped my own work . . . to get me to the point where I am.”

As important as the relationships they did have were the relationships they perceived to lack. Namely, as participants advanced into positions of higher responsibility, they noted the island that existed as they experienced isolation due to the nature of their roles. Because the structure of higher education does not create peer groups of similar work responsibilities at the senior student affairs level, participants described the need for intentional outreach to others, often outside of their organization, to fill that void. Crucial for participants was the presence of at least one connection to serve as a sounding board that they trusted to talk through difficult situations. Having supportive relationships with people whom participants valued their opinion provided validation in decision-making experiences, especially when these individuals were in positions of leadership and respect. Additionally, those relationships provided comfort and cushioning for the women as they navigated learning new jobs with big responsibility. The people connection was crucial in the growth participants had to experience, especially in the transitions to those big roles.

Participants described factors associated with the imposter phenomenon that influenced their experience of progression in their careers. Clance and Imes (1978) originally studied the Imposter Syndrome among high achieving women. Researchers have since applied the phenomenon to men and women alike, as well as to individuals in different disciplines and students (Clark et al., 2014; McDevitt, 2006; Villwock et al., 2018). The experiences participants described in this study align with the literature



applied to different professions. Clance and Imes (1978) focused on women's feelings of inadequacy, regardless of their expertise and tangible factors of credibility within their disciplines. Participants in this study shared the same such feelings as they described their experiences of progression to higher levels of leadership in student affairs, namely, during transitions to new roles of increased responsibility. All of the women who participated in this study had at least a master's degree, some had terminal degrees, and all of them had experience and expertise that allowed them to advance to leadership roles in their fields. Yet, they shared their experiences with feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, and lack of confidence at various points of their progression.

According to Clance and Imes (1978) fear of failure keeps individuals from participating authentically. An example of this behavior is a woman who remains silent in the face of an opposing viewpoint. Maren shared that she had such feelings as she navigated a new leadership role. She said, "I only felt comfortable speaking to a certain extent, I felt the serious imposter syndrome early on [in my leadership role]." Similarly, Bridget shared her experience with this situation, describing a time that she was not invited to an important meeting she knew she should have been invited to. She said:

It's awkward, because at that moment, I told her I don't need to be there. I mean, I just kind of felt I was like, I'm fine with not going. But then it's like [Bridget], you know, you do have a lot of input. So it was the people pleaser in me not wanting to be like, hey, I was asked when I was available. Why is this invite not on my calendar? . . . I don't know doesn't make you feel really good going into the meeting. Not that I would talk a lot anyway.

As Clance and Imes (1978) describe, the resulting sentiment leaves the woman feeling as though she might not have done well or that others consider her unintelligent if she shared her true feelings, thus reinforcing her lack of confidence in her actual viewpoints. Lynn shared a similar experience as she described her presence in high-level

meetings. She said, “I don't have a seat at the table, and so it's very tough, and I sometimes I wonder like, is it worth still fighting for? Where can we make a difference? Or do I need to hang my hat up and leave the profession.” This participant, a highly educated, highly experienced professional continues to navigate feelings of doubt as she progresses in her career, as she noted factors associated with the imposter phenomenon.

To navigate these sentiments associated with the imposter phenomenon, the women in this study described their support mechanisms. Multiple participants noted engaging in professional coaching to help navigate feelings of inadequacy and to tackle difficult situations in their roles. Participants also described the aforementioned relationships as being crucial to their growth in leadership roles. Having people at all levels of the organization support them was instrumental in participants getting their stride and becoming successful in their roles. Those relationships helped participants to navigate and get beyond those feelings of inadequacy and imposter.

Also of importance, is the impact of this work on individuals’ (1) holistic well-being, including the influences of the imposter phenomenon on (2) leaders’ well-being and (3) perception of well-being. The need for individuals to navigate the structures of higher education, and the effects on balance and well-being, is apparent.

### **Recommendations**

Additional research is needed to understand the experiences of women student affairs leaders as they progress in their careers. Namely, of importance is the need to understand how to best support these individuals, both before they enter the field and on-going throughout their careers. Suggestions for future research and implications on how specific populations may use the findings of this study are included below.

## **Implications**

### ***Student Affairs Preparation Programs***

Student affairs preparation programs should develop more understanding about how young professionals need to prepare themselves for future success in the field. Because the path to leadership roles in student affairs is not a straight line, future professionals need to understand the foundations necessary to navigate that winding road. Educating students on the realities of the senior student affairs role is crucial; if young professionals are our future senior leaders, they need to be equipped with the tools to navigate the political, cultural, and organizational aspects of the job. Because many professionals enter the profession with a desire to help students, seeing the connection between indirect student work and creating and advocating for the policies that support those students, is crucial. As Biddix (2013) explained, while career paths in student affairs follow a general course beginning with a graduate degree and entry-level position, the progressive responsibility that follows is inconsistent. Individuals must decide to work to advance or change fields all together. Because the exact blueprint does not exist for progression to and through a student affairs career, the importance of professionals surrounding themselves with people who support them and help them navigate their paths, is essential. These relationships set professionals up for growth and help individuals navigate feelings of the imposter phenomenon.

### ***University Administration***

Understanding how the structural realities influence staff and their progression into and through leadership roles is essential for university administrators, from senior leadership to the president/chancellor. Creating formal avenues for staff to grow and

advance will support the administrative structure of the university. Allowing staff to participate in apprenticeship-type experiences to learn from senior leaders early on in their careers will help to foster a pipeline of future senior student affairs leaders.

Intentionality in this area will create long-term success for not only the individuals who seek senior leadership opportunities, but also long-term stability for the institution as a whole. Treating this learning as a professional development opportunity with incentives for staff to participate will allow for step-wise leadership growth between the entry-level and higher level roles. These opportunities will provide an incubated space for capable young professionals to grow and prepare for future leadership success without getting thrown into the deep end of starting a new leadership role.

### ***Future Student Affairs Professionals***

As women consider a career in student affairs, understanding the complexities of leadership roles and the process of advancing into those roles, is crucial. The results of this study provide understanding of those factors and considerations individuals should make as they decide to pursue the work, and as they prepare for their careers through formal education as well as development opportunities. Specifically, understanding the value of forming supportive relationships from early in their journey, and surrounding themselves with a network of people they trust and respect to help them navigate their path.

### **Further Research Opportunities**

- Study succession planning among senior leadership roles, including an apprenticeship model for preparing leaders for future positions.

- Utilize a mixed methods study asking participants to complete the Clance Imposter Scale along with follow up focus groups with women who have experiences of progression to leadership roles.
- Complete a study of professionals who engage in a peer network support group, seeking understanding their perceptions of any benefits that come from that engagement.
- Complete a study focused on the characteristics of individuals who reach the senior student affairs role, including the Clance Imposter Scale assessment.
- Utilize Gallup Strengths-Based leadership assessments to compare professionals' top strengths with their experiences of progression.

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of women student affairs leaders and their career progression. By interviewing ten female mid- to senior-level student affairs leaders, I gained this understanding through their stories. These stories included successful advancement into major leadership roles in their organizations. Even with successful progression into significant roles, participants shared the often difficult pathways they have navigated to reach those roles; namely, their experiences with facets of the Imposter Phenomenon, and the importance of relationships as sources of support were apparent. Their stories and the resulting understanding will help professionals as they seek leadership roles in higher education, as well as the professionals who support these positions. Finally, understanding the factors that influence successful leadership progression among women can encourage change in institutions of higher education to prepare leaders and support them on their journeys.



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## **Appendix A**

### **Participant Informed Consent**



**IRB Project ID #:** 20238

**Study title:** Understanding the experiences of female student affairs leaders as they traverse the career ladder

Dear Participant,

**Invitation**

You are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

**What is the research for doing this research study?**

My name is Molly Belieu. I am conducting a study on to examine the lived experiences of women who graduated from a student affairs cohort program, and have traversed the career ladder to mid to high-level student affairs leadership and administrative roles within higher education. This study seeks understanding of women's career experiences, including their vertical movement to roles of increasing responsibility, wider influence, and greater accountability.

In order to participate, you must be 19 years of age or older, graduated from the UNL student affairs Master's degree program in 2012 or prior to that time, and hold a position in higher education that is assistant director or higher.

**What will be done during this research study?**

Participation in this study will require approximately 2 hours of your time. You will be asked to participate in an interview. Participation will take place via distance utilizing Zoom. You will also be asked to review the transcripts of your interview for accuracy as a follow up.

**What are the possible risks of this study?**

There are no known risks to you from being in this research study.

**What are the possible benefits to you?**

You may benefit from reflecting upon your career experiences. However, you may not get any benefit from being in this research study.

**How will your data be protected?**

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect the privacy and the confidentiality of your study data; however, in some circumstances we cannot guarantee absolute privacy and/or confidentiality. A transcriptionist will transcribe the interview based upon our recordings. The transcriptionist will complete a confidentiality agreement, and will not be acquainted with the participants. With possible future collaborations and/or publications, individual level data could be shared but would be de-identified.

The research records will be stored in a locked cabinet in the investigator's office and will only be seen by the research team and/or those authorized to view, access, or use the records during and after the study.

The research records will be securely stored electronically through University approved methods and will only be seen by the research team and/or those authorized to view, access, or use the records during and after the study is complete.

Those who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law or contract or institutional responsibility. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings and may be reported individually, or as group or summarized data but your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

#### **What are your rights as a research participant?**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

For study related questions, please contact the investigator(s):

*Primary investigator: Molly Belieu; [molly.handke@unmc.edu](mailto:molly.handke@unmc.edu); 402-321-3786*

*Secondary investigator: Dr. Marilyn Grady; [mgradyl@unl.edu](mailto:mgradyl@unl.edu); 402-472-0974*

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

- Phone: 1(402)472-6965
- Email: [irb@unl.edu](mailto:irb@unl.edu)

#### **What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?**

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study ("withdraw") at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

#### **Documentation of Informed Consent**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. By completing the interview process, you have given your consent to participate in this research. You should print a copy of this page for your records.

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Protocol**

**Interview Protocol**

- If you were to tell the story of your career pathway in student affairs, what would that story entail?
  - Tell me about your experience of progression and advancement throughout your career as you took on roles that gave you more responsibility, greater decision-making authority, additional influence?
  - Describe your FIRST professional experience in student affairs?
  - How did that work influence your future career path?
  - What support did you receive to develop professionally, within that role and beyond, formally and informally
- Do you have an advanced degree
  - What was your motivation to seek the degree?
  - Internal or external motivation?
  - Job dependent? Keeping doors open for yourself?
  - Always knew you were going to seek it?
- Would you consider yourself a high achieving individual?
  - What were your expectations of yourself within your career when you set out to work in student affairs?
- What advice would you give a new student affairs professional as they begin their career?
- Has mentorship or a peer network supported you throughout your advancing career?
  - Describe your experience with mentorship and its influence on your lateral progression in student affairs.
- Have you ever felt as though you had to justify your “seat at the table?”
  - Describe this experience.
  - Who did you have to justify it to?
  - Why did you have to justify it?



- Describe your experiences with having to advocate for your expertise within your role?
- Did you meet resistance when beginning any of your roles
  - Who showed you that resistance?
  - What did that look like?
  - How did you manage that resistance and persist beyond that resistance?
- What has your on-going training/education entailed?
- Describe how the culture of your organization done to influence your progression?
- Describe your approach to leading others
  - What kind of supervisory style do you employ?
  - What leadership style do you subscribe to?
- What kind of leadership have you experienced from your supervisor?
  - What kind of support have you received from your direct supervisor?
- Have you needed to seek support outside of your formal supervisor?
- What was your experience with networks of support?
  - Did you seek others intentionally? Did you have a natural peer group that you were able to seek for the purpose of support as you assumed roles of greater responsibility?
- Think about each stage of your career (initial role, mid level role, current role) and think about an accomplishment that you are most proud of in your career at each stage
  - Describe how you went about reaching that accomplishment
  - Describe any praise or recognition you received for that accomplishment, both professionally and personally
    - How did you react to that praise?
    - Did you feel worthy?
  - Describe any support or guidance you received to pursue and meet that accomplishment

## **Appendix C**

### **Institutional Review Board Approval**



## Official Approval Letter for IRB project #20238 - New Project Form

November 24, 2020

Molly Belieu  
Department of Educational Administration  
CON 4053 40484 UNMC NE 681985330

Marilyn Grady  
Department of Educational Administration  
TEAC 125 UNL NE 685880360

IRB Number: 20201120238EX

Project ID: 20238

Project Title: Understanding the experiences of female student affairs leaders as they traverse the career ladder

Dear Molly:

This letter is to officially notify you of the certification of exemption of your project for the Protection of Human Subjects. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects at 45 CFR 46 2018 Requirements and has been classified as exempt. Exempt categories are listed within HRPP Policy #4.001: Exempt Research available at: <http://research.unl.edu/research/compliance/policies-procedures/>.

o Date of Final Exemption: 11/24/2020

o Certification of Exemption Valid-Until: 11/24/2025

o Review conducted using exempt category 2b at 45 CFR 46.104

o Funding (Grant congruency, OSP Project/Form ID and Funding Sponsor Award Number, if applicable): N/A

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- \* Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- \* Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- \* Any protocol violation or protocol deviation
- \* An incarceration of a research participant in a protocol that was not approved to include prisoners
- \* Any knowledge of adverse audits or enforcement actions required by Sponsors
- \* Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- \* Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- \* Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 402-472-6965.

Sincerely,

Becky R. Freeman, CIP  
for the IRB



University of Nebraska-Lincoln Office of Research and Economic Development  
[nugrant.unl.edu](http://nugrant.unl.edu)

NUGrant

## **Appendix D**

### **Coding and Themes**

### Theme 1: Influence of Relationships on Experiences of Progression

<p>Sub-theme A: Mentorship</p>	<p><u>Coding</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship capital</li> <li>• Mentor support</li> <li>• Supervisor as mentor</li> <li>• Relationships with former supervisor</li> <li>• Relationships with non-supervising leaders</li> <li>• Mentors informal and formal</li> <li>• Relationships as influential</li> <li>• Ability to grow due to connections</li> </ul>
<p>Sub-theme B: Peer networks</p>	<p><u>Coding</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Benefits of relationships with others who do similar work</li> <li>• Colleagues you can trust</li> <li>• Authenticity in relationships</li> <li>• Professional staff dynamic</li> <li>• Peers as mentors</li> <li>• Peers as professional development</li> <li>• Connections with others across campuses</li> <li>• Connections with those who do different work</li> <li>• Creating credibility</li> <li>• Political capital</li> <li>• Peer groups evolving</li> <li>• Professional networks</li> <li>• Colleagues as support</li> </ul>
<p>Sub-theme C: Loneliness and the concept of the island</p>	<p><u>Coding</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of peer connection</li> <li>• Peers don't understand work</li> <li>• Relationships changing</li> <li>• Importance of relationships</li> <li>• Collaboration with others</li> <li>• Sounding boards don't exist</li> <li>• Finding your peers</li> <li>• Finding your people</li> <li>• Relationships needed most but lack</li> </ul>

## Theme 2: Navigating the structures of Higher Education

<p>Sub-theme A: Organizational structure as barriers or support to advancement</p>	<p><u>Coding</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher education structures</li> <li>• Winding pathways</li> <li>• Administrative structure unsupportive</li> <li>• Non-student affairs leaders supervising</li> <li>• Reporting structures</li> <li>• Faculty and staff dynamic</li> <li>• Academic and student affairs dynamic</li> </ul>
<p>Sub-theme B: Lack of formal advancement structures</p>	<p><u>Coding</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progression is not consistent</li> <li>• Winding progression paths</li> <li>• No blueprint for direct advancement</li> <li>• Incongruent structures within different departments</li> <li>• Moving departments to advance</li> <li>• Moving universities to advance</li> <li>• Growing out of the profession</li> </ul>
<p>Sub-theme C: Profiles of the individual women</p>	<p><u>Coding</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helping orientations</li> <li>• Strengths</li> <li>• Gallup strengths</li> <li>• Self-awareness</li> <li>• Leadership styles</li> <li>• Desire to serve others</li> <li>• Student-centered focus</li> <li>• Discovering the why</li> <li>• Making a difference</li> <li>• Achievement orientation</li> </ul>
<p>Sub-theme D: Managing up, down, and through</p>	<p><u>Coding</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personnel management</li> <li>• Difficult conversations</li> <li>• Peers as supervisees</li> <li>• Managing up to supervisor/leader</li> <li>• Hiring and firing</li> <li>• Finding the right people for the right roles</li> </ul>



### Theme 3: Experiences of the Imposter Phenomenon

<p>Sub-theme A: Transitions to leadership roles</p>	<p><u>Coding</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assuming the big roles</li> <li>• Initial transition</li> <li>• Starting over in building capital</li> <li>• Scaffolding when beginning a new role</li> <li>• Leadership strategies</li> <li>• Supervision dynamic</li> <li>• Support or lack of support from direct supervisor</li> <li>• Times of transition highlighting imposter</li> </ul>
<p>Sub-theme B: Navigating feelings of Imposter</p>	<p><u>Coding</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional coaching support</li> <li>• Remembering your why</li> <li>• Remembering your expertise</li> <li>• Keeping focus on passions</li> <li>• Relationships with people you trust</li> <li>• Mentorship</li> <li>• Imposter feelings as barriers to success</li> <li>• Seeking support for feelings</li> <li>• Making intentional connections</li> </ul>
<p>Sub-theme C: The concept of worthiness</p>	<p><u>Coding</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questioning self</li> <li>• Questioning expertise</li> <li>• Knowing worth</li> <li>• Knowing expertise</li> <li>• Owning credentials</li> <li>• Advocating for self</li> <li>• Believing in credentials</li> <li>• Confidence in expertise</li> <li>• Need to speak up</li> <li>• Having a seat at the table</li> <li>• Using the seat at the table</li> <li>• Confidence in sharing</li> <li>• Remembering your path</li> <li>• Reinforcement from others in leadership</li> <li>• Relationships building confidence</li> </ul>



